

Mother's Day

Eric Denney
May 14, 2023

Happy Mother's Day! What a beautiful day—a day set aside to celebrate our moms—and what an honor to open God's Word with you this morning. When it comes to moms, I hit the jackpot. I was raised by an incredible mom and dad who loved my brother and me well, who cared for us and provided for us. I married a woman who had parents who loved her well, and then took me in as a son and loved me well. I did a great job picking out a mom for my kids. Although Marci is an incredible mom, I think we can't undersell the fact that I picked her out to mother my kids, so the real hero is me! Marci is amazing—she loves that herd of kids we have like no mom I've ever seen. When I say I hit the jackpot regarding mothers in my life, I am not kidding. I love you, Mom; I love you, Granny; and I really love you, Marci! Thank you for being incredible moms.

I hope you can celebrate your mom today, and moms, I hope you will be celebrated well. I know that today has many emotions associated with it; some are festive, some are not. Today comes with sadness for some of us because we have lost our mothers; it comes with heartbreak because our mom wasn't everything we hope a mom would be; it comes with heartbreak because some here haven't been the mom they dreamed they would be; and others struggle because they want to be a mom and have not received that blessing yet. Today comes with a ton of emotions and I think it's important that we acknowledge them all as we open up with a word of prayer.

Like many other holidays, Mother's Day is a day when people reflect on their lives. To help us do that this morning, let's look at a mother from a long time ago. I want you to meet someone who was probably never up for the "Mother of the Year" award. This is Zelda Cole James Simms Samuel. (View online sermon to see photo.) Zelda was born in 1825 and she married Robert James at 16 years old. They had four kids, three of whom lived to adulthood: Frank, Jesse and Susan.

Shortly after their daughter was born, Robert—a preacher and hemp farmer—left the family to be a traveling evangelist, although it is speculated that he left because of his strong-willed wife. Robert died six months after leaving home.

Next Zelda married Benjamin Simms, a very wealthy man who also left her and passed away shortly after leaving. Then she married Reuben Samuel. In an unusual circumstance for this era, Zelda convinced Reuben to leave her the farm if he passed before her. She had been left with nothing from her other marriages and was not going to lose control of her life again.

Zelda was very strong-willed and a devoted Confederate. She was on her third marriage, she had kids by two husbands, she had negotiated with her current husband to leave her the farm if he were to pass, and she ruled her farm with an iron fist—including her treatment of slaves who worked the farm for her. When the Confederates lost the war, Zelda's hate for the Federals peaked, as did that of her sons, Frank and Jesse—yep, Jesse James. In retaliation for the Confederate's loss, Frank and Jesse became bank robbers and grew a reputation for being evil villains. Zelda was a loving mom to her kids, always offering an alibi if they needed one, praising her kids when someone would listen. When agents tossed a smoke bomb into their house, hoping to force Frank and Jesse out of the house, the bomb misfired, killing one of the younger kids and tearing off Zelda's arm, but neither Frank nor Jesse was home. Eventually the

boys were killed—that’s a story for another time—and Zelda turned her home into a museum for the James Gang, even selling pebbles from Jesse’s grave and guns the boys had owned and used, making sure she kept up their unique reputation. When the guns and pebbles were all sold, she pulled pebbles from the creek sand and bought cheap guns that she kept selling as authentic. Zelda Cole James Simms Samuel was quite a mother!

I’ll bet that if we could go back and talk with a sixteen-year-old Zelda, we would find that her plans for her family and her life never included the death of two husbands, financial woes, a war that turned her kids into villains, or losing an arm. I’ll bet her hopes and dreams included being a great wife, an amazing mom, and a successful farmer, yet life circumstances caused her to be controlling and manipulative. In many ways these are characteristics that made her a survivor; in other ways they developed a dysfunctional family of bank robbers. And I’ll bet that even though most of our stories don’t include the dramatic events of Zelda’s life, our lives are not exactly how we imagined them. I’ll bet we could all tell a story of hopes, dreams, failures, heartbreak, ways we have been mistreated and ways we have mistreated others. Often we have this fairytale life planned out in our minds and real life doesn’t play out like that. Sometimes we have had offenses against us that we cannot help, but the consequences are just as real as if we made the mistake ourselves. Other times we just make bad choices. There is a popular sign that says, “Everything happens for a reason. Sometimes the reason is you are stupid and make bad decisions.” There have been seasons of my life when I was the poster child for this sign—and there are others in this room who should have it hanging in their house, too. But here is the amazing thing that brings us all together today: God doesn’t care if our challenges have been put on us innocently or if we have inflicted them on ourselves. God’s love for us is the same. He doesn’t offer help to some of us. He is offering His love to every single one of us, regardless of what our lives look like or how we got there.

Would you look at the story of Adam and Eve in the garden in Genesis 3 with me? Here we meet the first two people created by God. They lived in a beautiful garden where they had a great relationship with God. God put Adam in the Garden of Eden, put him in charge of everything and gave him one rule: “Don’t eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.” God said if you do all this, we’re going to be great. God created Eve and together she and Adam were livin’ the dream in the Garden of Eden. They were “naked and felt no shame” because they had nothing to be ashamed of. That’s where our story begins.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

“You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. (Genesis 3:1-7)

There is a lot going on in this story, but to over-simplify what is happening, notice how a crafty serpent convinces Eve that something God warned them against is really a great thing, and that she should desire it more than what God said is best. The serpent (can we all say “Satan”?) manipulates the truth and encourages Adam and Eve to turn away from what God knows is best. Suddenly they decide they know better than God. It probably wasn’t a verbal conversation or drawn out debate between them. It was probably more like, “That fruit looks really good. I’m hungry. How can eating this fruit be bad?”—crunch! It probably all happened that quickly. There wasn’t a theological breakdown of what God said or what might happen if they ate the fruit. It was a decision made on the fly that impacted their lives dramatically and has impacted all our lives ever since. But that day, standing in the garden, it didn’t seem like a big deal.

Have you ever made a rash decision that went against the will of God? Ever? Did you ever think, “It’s really not that big of a deal?” Have you ever felt the consequences of that decision long after the moment you made that decision? Sometimes the decision isn’t even a sin, but just a decision that doesn’t set you up for a better relationship with God. It’s a decision that slowly separates you from him. You go on date with someone you know doesn’t live a Christ-centered lifestyle, and years later you are trapped in a bad marriage or at least a bad relationship or dealing with scars from the relationship. You smoke weed at a party with a bunch of your friends and years later you are battling addiction issues that have more control over you than you ever imagined possible. You start spending a little more than you make and find yourself trapped in a cycle of debt that prevents you from ever relaxing and enjoying the things that are really important.

Remember that serpent from the story. He’s creative, sneaky, and deceptive. He will entangle himself into our lives in ways that we never notice—until we notice—and by that time there are usually consequences that we must deal with that make it hard to walk away from whatever “it” is, like the addiction, the debt.

Sometimes the consequences come because this creative, sneaky, and deceptive serpent has waged battle against someone else and we happen to encounter that person. It isn’t our choice, and as a matter of fact we had no say in the decision to interact with someone or be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Marci and I were hit head on in a car accident a few years ago. We were driving straight on a road when a guy coming the opposite direction came into our lane and hit us head on. We didn’t do anything to cause the accident, yet the pain was real, the damage to our vehicle was real. The other driver fled the scene, leaving his truck in the middle of the road. His issues, whatever they were that caused him to think running away was the best way to deal with the accident, did not make any of the repercussions for Marci and me any less. No matter who you have been hurt by, how wrong they were doesn’t make your consequences any less, and you still have to deal with those consequences. Left untreated, those wounds fester and slowly get worst.

Here is the amazing thing about Jesus: He loves you. He loves all of you. He loves all of us and He is ready to help all of us as soon as we cry out to Him. In Revelation, Jesus is talking to one of the churches, one that isn't really living out everything God wants them to, and He says to them, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and He with me" (Revelation 3:20).

Those words are to a church that is not living up to the lifestyle God desires. They are words of love. If they will let Jesus in, He will come in and eat with them, sit at their table, visit and talk, feast with them. Those are words of a loving Jesus who wants the best for them. He wants the same for you.

If we go back to the story of Adam and Eve, after they messed everything up and ate the fruit, after they recognized their nakedness and tried to cover themselves, after God introduced them to the consequences of their actions, listen to what God did for them: "The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them" (Genesis 3:21).

Did you catch what the creator God of the universe did there? God, who loved having Adam and Eve in the perfect garden, who gave them one rule to follow, who could have punished them in horrible ways, did you notice that instead, He made them garments to cover themselves? He loved them so much He didn't want them to live in shame. He continued to love them, even though they messed everything up, and He continues to love you.

When we realize that, it changes everything. I'm not talking about when we hear the name Jesus and believe He is a character from the Bible, or when we go to church on Sunday so the kids know who He is. I'm talking about when we begin to wrap our minds around the idea that Jesus is God's son, that He came to this earth to pay the price for our mess-ups, that He was perfect, that His love is unconditional. When we surrender our lives to the lordship of Jesus Christ, repent and get baptized, that changes everything. The apostle Paul understood that; he said, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Understanding who Jesus is changes our hearts immediately but doesn't always change our behaviors overnight. Those behaviors, those attitudes, those chips on our shoulders, those are caused by all the consequences—some from our actions, some from other's actions. Some of those habits and traumas and relationships have been around for a long time and it will take some time to change them. But our new hearts begin to see things differently, we prioritize things differently, we see people differently. We recognize that having a relationship with Jesus takes effort on our part; we have to open the door and let Him in. We have free will to open the door or not. He is waiting; it's up to us.

There is nothing we can do to make Jesus love us any more than He does. His love is there for our taking. But just like there are things I can do to strengthen my relationship with Marci, or my kids, or my friends, there are things I can do to strengthen my relationship with Jesus. This is when we are untangling the consequences of our lives. These are things that I believe should be part of your rhythm of life as well, some practices that help you get to know Jesus better:

Read the Bible

There are many ways we can get to know God, including listening to sermons, podcasts, and worship songs. With today's technology the ways to hear about Jesus are practically endless and those are great resources. But there is nothing better than spending time with someone in order to hear from them. I knew Marci before we dated, I knew some of her friends, I saw her on occasions when we were at the same place at the same time, but I didn't get to know her until we started spending time together. That's when I fell in love with her, when I picked her out to be my kid's mom. That never would have happened if we didn't spend time together. How do you expect to get to know Jesus if you don't spend time with Him? The Apostle Paul said, "All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

That's a pretty powerful promise about God's word, and how knowing His word equips us for living a life committed to Him. Some of us are thinking that reading scripture doesn't do any good because we don't understand it when we read it. I am a huge fan of music—lots of music, all sorts of music. Many times I hear a song and have no idea what it means, but after I hear it a dozen times, or after I get a little older, I understand what the writer meant, and to be honest sometimes I wish I still didn't understand! It may take reading our Bibles more than one time through. Many of the people I know whose lives have been most transformed by the word of God have read their Bibles over and over and over again. There was a first time they read it, and I'll bet they didn't understand it all when they did.

Pray

Prayer is how we talk with God. It can be done in a formal setting, or it can be done while driving to work. Prayer is a conversation. It is our way of centering our attention on God's ability to be part of our lives, whether we are praying for our faith, praying for a sick friend, praying to find a job. We can take all our prayers and concerns to the Father. Scripture tells us that our prayers are like incense to God. He loves to hear from us.

James, Jesus' half-brother, tells us to pray about everything: "Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sign songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord" (James 5:13-14).

This week I received a phone call from someone I ran around with back in high school. He was one of my best friends. He moved out of state and we've tried to stay in contact, but you know how that goes. He said he was bored, so he was thumbing through his phone and saw my number. We hadn't talked for a long time, so he called. He was having dialysis because he is in the midst of kidney failure. He wanted prayer, and he wanted to spread the word that he needs a kidney. He wanted to pray so we prayed, and I'll continue to pray.

We want The Creek to be a house of prayer, full of people who pray continually. If you've been through Rooted, you know that each group has a prayer experience. If you came to the church

during Holy Week, you know there were areas set up for prayer all week long. We need to pray more, we need to pray for others more, we need to pray together more—we need to pray.

Hang out with friends who love Jesus

There is a pretty famous quote that says, “Show me your friends and I’ll show you your future.” I’m not sure who said it. Google attributes it to a few different people, but that doesn’t change how accurate it is. Those we hang around with have an influence on us, whether we want to admit it or not. Who do you hang out with?

Do your friends love God and love others, or do your friends hate everything that is going on around the world and just want to sit and complain about it? Do your friends go out of their way to serve others, or are your friends bitter that they don’t have as much as others? Do your friends work out and try to be healthy, or do they love to kick back a six pack after work and watch the latest Netflix series?

We meet people at work or school, at the stores we frequent. We develop new friendships all the time, but I’m talking about friends who are in your inner circle. This takes some intentionality and purpose. This is picking out folks who live a life worthy of being influenced by. These friends have the ability to make you better or make you worse, so choose wisely!

In Acts, we hear stories of people providing for each other’s needs, selling what they have and splitting everything up so nobody does without. That is Christian community, that is what we’re talking about. Ecclesiastes says, “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: if one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10).

Making friends may be hard for you, it may take some real work, but it is so worth it. The Creek wants to help you with that, too. Watch for Rooted sign-ups in August and get started in a Rooted group that helps you make friends here at church. Get online and request to serve in a ministry or better yet, go to Kidustrial Park, or stop someone standing at a door and ask them how to get involved in serving. Make some friends. Your church community isn’t perfect (we broke that streak when they let me in), but there are a ton of folks around here who love God and who would love to be your friend. If the consequences you are dealing with are traumatic or preventing you from moving forward in life, seek some professional help. Counselors and therapists are great help; include them in your inner circle!

There we have it: three ideas to help connect us with Jesus. There are a million others. These are not the magic three, but three that really help me as I work to know Jesus better, three that I have seen present in some folks I really look up to and respect. God wants our heart; He wants us to put effort into knowing Him. When we do that, He promises to change everything.

I want to get off track for a minute and speak privately to anyone here who is married, anyone who has children, anyone who plans to be married or plans to have children. Maybe if you know someone who is married or know someone who has children, you should go ahead and listen, too.

This whole idea of God being the creator of the universe and loving us unconditionally is a message for all of us. It is the message that changes everything in our lives. If you are married, you should be pursuing a relationship with Jesus alongside your wife or husband. Jesus says when we marry, we become one flesh, so everything we do should be to strengthen our relationship with Jesus and with our spouse. If our spouse doesn't know Jesus, we get the privilege of showing them Jesus, of loving them like Jesus does and setting that example.

If you are a parent or plan to be a parent, it's vitally important that you recognize it is your privilege—and your responsibility—to teach your children about Jesus. Nowhere in scripture does it suggest that our role as parents is to take our kids to a church where they can learn about Jesus. The church should be a huge resource for you and an amazing place to connect with others who are pursuing Jesus, but the responsibility of teaching your kids who Jesus is and what a relationship with Him looks like is yours, just like teaching them to walk, or run, or use the potty.

The Creek wants to help you grow in your relationship with Jesus while you are helping your kids grow in relationship with Him. We are a church family, right? And family helps each other out. We are developing a Marriage and Parenting Ministry that will help couples planning to get married through premarital counseling. Many pastors on staff do this now and we're working on a plan for a bunch of couples to do it together, so they get to know each other. Watch for that in the fall. We are working on couples' study to help strengthen existing marriages, a way to get to know other married couples and learn tools to help strengthen the marriage you are in. We are creating a list of counselors and resources for families in crisis. And we're working on our first parenting class that will be available in August. Again, it's a way for us to connect with other parents who are cultivating homes where Jesus is worshiped.

On The Creek's website, there is a Marriage & Parenting page; you can find it from the Family tab. Keep an eye on that website for classes, groups, and an Amazon list of books and other resources.

A few years ago, our first grandchild was born. He's in second grade now—boy how time flies. When he was born, our son and daughter-by-choice lived in Panama City, Florida, so when we got the word that she was in labor we loaded the van with clothes and children and headed south. After we were there a few days, they all came home from the hospital, and we stayed to visit and help with the new baby. We ate, we played, we changed dirty diapers, we—are you ready for this?—went to the beach. Our daughter-by-choice is a real trouper. It was a fantastic visit!

Our oldest has a great sense of humor; he is absolutely hysterical. We spent our life trying to give him margin to be silly and set boundaries that were respectful of others, things all parents try to do. One night we were all talking about how great it was to be together, and with some silly banter, trying to convince the Florida Denneys to move north to be around everyone again. They encouraged everyone to move south instead of them moving north: “What do you have in Indy

that we don't have in Florida?" was part of the conversation, and all we could come up with was snow.

Later that night, when Marci and I were in bed, trying to go to sleep, we were interrupted by our oldest son, a fan, and a bag of flour. He set the fan up at the foot of our bed and the laughter caused everyone in the house to come running to see what was going on. When he turned on the fan, I could only imagine what was about to happen and began to suspect he was going to cross one of those boundaries I tried to set while he was growing up in our house. When he opened the bag of flour, I started to imagine how upset Marci was going to be when the flour started to fly, then how upset his wife would be, then that thought was lost when the flour started to fly! "Snow? You think we don't have snow in Florida?" He held a handful of flour in front of the fan and the room filled with white snow in Florida. The laughter was unbelievable; the mess was unbelievable—and we were proved wrong as we saw snow in Florida! Among the laughing and the flying flour and the mess I remember hearing, "You can't stop me, Mom. This is my house!" He was right—it was his house, his family, his life. And we love him just as much after the snow in Florida as we did before. As a matter of fact, there is nothing any of the kids could do that would impact how much we love them.

Which makes me want to circle back and think about our "not so great mother," Zelda Cole James Simms Samuel. She had a rough life. We could probably say it was a miserable life. It made her miserable; it made her raise miserable kids. But at any given moment she could have turned her attention to Jesus and He would have welcomed her with open arms. None of her actions caused Jesus to love her any less or any more, and none of yours have caused Him to love you any less or any more either. Jesus loves you so much that He came to the earth, died and rose again, all to be in relationship with you.