

“Stories of Jacob – Hindsight is 20 / 20”

need to ask, where am I reluctant in moving closer to “all”? Why? Where is the next step I need to take in following Jesus? Same thing in the other great summary: “love your neighbour as yourself”. The challenging word in this summary arose from the conversation Jesus had that gave us the Good Samaritan story: “who is my neighbour?” I need to ask, who am I reluctant to include in my definition of “neighbour”? Why? Where is the next step I need to take here in following Jesus?

I had a powerful experience of this kind of reflection back in June when I was in Boston working there with the leadership of a denomination. I was helping them build a program. I got the unexpected opportunity to spend 3 hours in one-on-one conversation with a woman who had spent 35 years in a ministry of advocacy and training in race relationships in the USA. She was African American. Now, I am Canadian! I am a Christian! So I don't think I have racial prejudices. That's my attitude. But over those three hours of discussion I really began to question my attitude. We talked about the Black experience in the States since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's and the many things that haven't changed. We talked about the belief that “all men are created equal” but also the attitudes towards that belief that holds back the full expression of that belief. I learned how attitudes regarding race has fostered class division in their society based on race. As we talked about “white privilege” I began to wonder whether I have been so embedded in a culture of white privilege that I haven't been able to recognize that white privilege actually exists. I really started to look at my presumptions—my attitude—that I am not prejudiced. After reflection I don't think I am, but I now watch out for this in my life. I no longer presume it. I am now much more conscious of wanting not to be. Why did I want this conversation and this reflection? I wanted to reflect on the work before us in reconciliation with our indigenous peoples. As we considered last week, reconciliation is at the heart of the Gospel. I wanted to learn from the American Black experience and how that can help me understand what we face. I knew already that the challenge we face is significant but my biggest takeaway from that experience and that reflection is that the challenge is so much greater than I appreciated.

100 years ago the first modern psychologist William James wrote, “The greatest discovery of any generation is that a human can alter his life by altering his attitude.” As people of faith we have known this for millennia—all the way back to Jacob. If you wish to be a follower of Jesus, embrace this practice, embrace the reflective life, for it will alter your life and redefine how you follow Jesus.

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Life for Jacob has come full circle. After more than 14 years Jacob was heading back to Bethel. It was at Bethel that he had his dream of ascending and descending angels. It was here that God made astonishing promises to Jacob. But the Jacob we see now is a very different man. The first time Jacob wanted to relate to God on his own terms. The first time he did not love God with all his heart, soul and mind. Rather, in responding to God's great promises to him, he said, “**IF** God will be with me, and **IF** God will keep me in this way that I go, and **IF** God will give me bread to eat and **IF** God gives me clothes to wear, so that I do come again to my father's house in peace, **THEN** the Lord shall be my God” (vs 21-22). In the following 14+ years what happened? God had been with him. God kept him safe in his travels. He had food and clothing—indeed he became a wealthy man. He did return to his father's house in peace. In fact, the brother who wanted to murder him forgave him. All Jacob's conditions had been met...and they were met because God had made a promise to his grandfather Abraham about his progeny who God wanted to be a blessing to all nations. If God's hope for the world was going to be fulfilled, and for God's plan to work, that meant that God had to work with what God got...even if it meant working with the likes of Jacob. So God promised Jacob at Bethel 14 or more years earlier “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you may go and I will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (28:15). And Jacob could see it. So when God directed Jacob to return to Bethel, Jacob obeyed. He was making God his Lord. What else did Jacob do? He asked for everybody's idols and he buried them. The God of Abraham and Isaac was going to be Jacob's God exclusively, and be the God of all in his household exclusively. He was making God his Lord. Jacob directed his entire household to purify themselves for the worship of God. He was making God his Lord.

So when you boil it all down, what do we see happening here? It's a conversion story, isn't it? The Jacob of old was selfish and self-centered—now he was God-centered. The Jacob of old wanted God on his own terms—now he honoured God on God's terms. Jacob's core nature, character, identity, his sense of self had all shifted. His worldview was different. All these things changed because he had a change in his attitudes. And his attitude changed because he engaged in reflection.

The word “attitude” gets a bad rap at times. When we hear the word used in conversation it frequently has a negative connotation. Like, “I asked the waiter for a clean fork and all I got was *attitude*.” We all have attitudes and we could not live without them. Attitudes are semi-permanent judgements about beliefs, values, expectations, priorities, norms of behaviour. The role of attitudes is to speed up our decision-making. Attitudes are pre-decisions that we can call on to make quick decisions. We have hundreds of them around a wide range of things. The judgements that make an attitude are simple ones: good / bad, right / wrong, true / false. For example, your attitude may be that clothing bound for the laundry should go directly into the laundry hamper...but your spouse or teenager may not share your attitude...so clothing piled on the floor may be a point of frustration. On the other end of the scale our political views are attitudes—semi-permanent judgements—that shape a lot about how we see and understand society. Take the case of a person who has struggles in life. There is one belief that we are all individuals, that we all need to be self-responsible, each of us having the capacity to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, to deal with struggles. An attitude is a semi-permanent judgement on a belief like this. For some people their judgement is “yes, this is true”. That’s their attitude. For other their judgement is “no this is not true”. Consequently this group might think people with struggles need the help of the community, society, government services. In my definition I’ve said attitudes are semi-permanent. Our attitudes are shaped by our upbringing and by our experience, and many attitudes persist long past childhood and long after the experience. But it has been said that throughout the 20th century the single most important discovery in the world of psychology is that we can change our attitudes.

Jacob changed his. Thinking back four weeks, what were Jacob’s attitudes in the beginning of his story? Well, in Jacob’s day there was a universal belief that gods should be respected and obeyed. What was Jacob’s early judgement about that belief – his attitude? He was clearly ambivalent about that belief. Cautious. Not so sure how “good” (the judgement) that belief was. This one attitude was influenced by another one Jacob had. He had a self-serving attitude—that serving his own interests was “good”. Because of that attitude he could steal his brother’s inheritance. He could disrespect his father by fooling him to grant Jacob the blessing intended for Esau. Because of that self-serving attitude Jacob named conditions that had to be met before he would respect and obey the God of Abraham and Isaac. “If God does these things for me then this god will be my Lord.” But at the end of Jacob’s story we find his attitudes changed. When Esau turned down the gift of livestock, the old Jacob would have been relieved and glad to keep them. But the new Jacob “urged and urged” his brother to take his gift. The new Jacob wouldn’t take “no” for an answer. That self-serving

attitude was now gone. Similarly his attitude changed regarding respecting and obeying the God of his forebears. His attitude shifted from ambivalence to priority.

Jacob’s attitudes changed, and they changed because he engaged in reflection. First, he looked back on the promises God made to his grandfather, his father and to him. In other words, he reflected on the word of God. Second, he reflected on his experience over the past 14+ years of his life—that crazy soap opera drama. And as he reflected on his experience he could see how God had influenced things, had met Jacob’s needs and fulfilled God’s promises to him. We know he did this kind of reflection because in the story we hear him say to his household, “God answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.” So he reflected on God’s word, on his experience, and that led him to reconsider his attitudes.

When I sum it all up in one sentence like that it can sound quite familiar, right? I’m sure each of us can name moments when we’ve done this kind of reflection ourselves that has led to personal change. As a preacher I can say that our business is to help you do this kind of reflection! That’s because for all of us—disciples of Jesus—our attitudes are key. Our beliefs are vital and life-giving, but our attitudes are key to how we unleash and live out our beliefs. Attitudes are judgements we make about beliefs, values, priorities. For example, about 2/3’s of all Canadians can affirm the belief that “Jesus is the son of God” and yet less than 1/3 of them are connected with a church. That’s because of their attitude. An attitude is a judgement made about a belief. Our attitude (yours and mine) is this: “If Jesus is the son of God, that must make a difference in my life. And so I come to worship, I participate in the faith community, I try to follow Jesus...” That is our attitude. But for most of Canadians who believe Jesus is the Son of God, they don’t share our attitude. They’ve made a different judgement on that belief. Like the old Jacob, the judgement they make is one of ambivalence. While so many affirm this belief it doesn’t make an impact on their life. That’s their attitude.

Growth in faith...maturing in Christ requires us to become reflective people. To meditate on the word of God, to look at our life habits and experiences, and re-consider our attitudes. Think of it in terms of the great summary for our faith. “You are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind.” We all believe that. But what is our attitude towards this belief? What is the judgement we’ve made on that belief? The challenging word in this summary is “all”: all our heart, soul and mind. I can honestly and humbly confess that I have not yet reached the point of “all”. So in my discipleship I need to reflect on my attitude. I