

August 12, 2012

Jacob
Pray for Felix
Genesis 35:1-7

Opening words: William Temple, the renowned archbishop of Canterbury, once defined worship this way: *worship is the quickening the conscience by the holiness of God, feeding the mind with the truth of God, purging the imagination by the beauty of God, opening the heart to the love of God, and devoting the will to the purpose of God.* In short, the reason you come to church is to experience God. However, let us be completely honest. There are no guarantees you will experience God in church every week. Have you ever left church still spiritually hungry? If you have then this message is for you.

This is message number nine in my summer sermon series on Jacob. We are late in the story. Jacob has returned home after a twenty year absence. He has been forgiven by his brother for his past misdeeds. He is about to move into the future but there is one thing still left to do. God instructs him to return to Bethel and build an altar. It is at the altar that we experience God. May God give you ears to hear this morning's scripture lesson, Genesis 35:1-7. Let me call this message *Pray for Felix.*

Genesis 35:1-7 1 Then God said to Jacob, "Go up to Bethel and settle there, and build an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau." 2 So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, and purify yourselves and change your clothes. 3 Then come, let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone." 4 So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods they had and the rings in their ears, and Jacob buried them under the oak at Shechem. 5 Then they set out, and the terror of God fell on the towns all around them so that no one pursued them. 6 Jacob and all the people with him came to Luz (that is, Bethel) in the land of Canaan. 7 There he built an altar, and he called the place El Bethel, because it was there that God revealed himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother.

The times have changed. If you don't believe me then listen to this story. The great missionary to India, William Carey (1761-1834), became deeply concerned about the attitude of his son Felix. The young man, a professing Christian, had promised to become a missionary. But he broke his vow when he was appointed ambassador to Burma. Carey was not impressed. He went to church the next Sunday and requested prayer for his son. He said, *"Pray for Felix. He has degenerated into an ambassador of the British government when he should be*

...serving the King of kings." The story is about priorities. The father questioned his own son's priorities. Do you have a Felix in your life? Do you have someone in your life with questionable priorities? What is your top priority in life?

If you make a list of your list of your top priorities then you will find they fall into these four categories.

1. Health You have said it a million times. If you have your health then you have everything. Leo Tolstoy once said, *"The body is the machine for living."*

2. Relationships We are social animals. We need people in our lives. Tennessee Williams once said, *"Life is partly what we make it, and partly what it is made by the friends we choose."*

3. Purpose None of us wants to just be a consumer in this world. We want to do something with our lives that makes a difference. God designed you for a specific reason. Denis Waitley once said, *"Don't ever let economics alone determine your career or how you spend the majority of your time"*

4. Fun or satisfaction What are you doing fun today? I have asked that question for years. I believe we should all have a little fun everyday. It has been said, *"Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift. That is why we call it the present."*

Is there a Felix in the house? Is there anyone here who has mixed up priorities? Is there anyone here who has mixed up priorities when it comes to the life of the church? Jesus must be the top priority in the life of the church. On the day Jesus is no longer the top priority, we really stop being the church. The church is not a social hall. The church is not a community center. The church is a cultural performing arts center. The church is the church. The church does not exist to make you feel special or to correct your poor attitude. The church is the bride of Christ. We really exist for one reason and one reason only. We exist to make disciples for Jesus Christ! Nothing else really matters. It sounds simple but human have made it very complex. Answer this difficult question. How many disciple have we made lately? With this in mind let us look at this morning's scripture lesson.

If you were with us last week then you will remember that Jacob had returned home after a twenty year absence. During that two decade period, Jacob had changed. Everyone in Jacob's life had changed. His parents Isaac and Rachel had grown old. Esau had learned the power of forgiveness. He was still red and hairy but he was no longer threatening his brother. He accepted his brother. Jacob, himself, had changed. He had learned from his mistakes. He had become a wise leader. It appears the stage is set for a happy ending but there is still one more thing to do. He needs to thank God for all his blessings. It is for this reason God

instructs Jacob to build an altar at Bethel.

Genesis 35:2 is key. Before Jacob's family begins the journey to Bethel he instructs his people with these words. *"Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, and purify yourselves and change your clothes."* Those words are key because they speak to our generation. Jacob knows something we need to hear. If you really want to worship God then you have to eliminate all the distractions. The God of the universe deserves your complete attention. Is there a Felix in the house? Is there someone here today who is guilty of having mixed up priorities? In a perfect church we come here to worship God. Why did you come to church today?

Today, I want to talk about three things you don't need to worship God. First, you don't need **your distractions**. The church is filled with good things that distract us from worshipping God. Second, you don't need **your agenda**. Are you more concerned about God or your comfort or opinions? Third and finally, you don't need **your inflexibility**. Are you open to change or do you love yourself just the way you are? If you really want to worship God then you only need one thing: A passion for Jesus! If you are ready to begin say, **"Amen!"**

Your Distractions

This story bothers me. A lighthouse along a bleak coast was tended by a keeper who was given enough oil for one month and told to keep the light burning every night. One day a woman asked for oil so that her children could stay warm. Then a farmer came. His son needed oil for a lamp so he could read. Still another needed some for an engine. The keeper saw each as a worthy request and measured out just enough oil to satisfy all. Near the end of the month, the tank in the lighthouse ran dry. That night the beacon was dark and three ships crashed on the rocks. More than 100 lives were lost. When a government official investigated, the man explained what he had done and why. "You were given one task alone," insisted the official. "It was to keep the light burning. Everything else was secondary."

First, if you want to worship God then you have to loose your distractions. In the life of the church we get so involved in good things that we forget the best thing. We exist to make disciples for Jesus Christ. Everything else is secondary. What has your attention right now? Is anyone here distracted by the deaf whispering person next to you? Is anyone here distracted by something that happened yesterday? Is anyone here distracted by something you have to do this week? Is anyone here distracted by your coffee pot? Did you turn it off before you left home? Did you lock the front door? Is there going to be room at the restaurant for lunch or are you going to have to wait? Has anyone here ever sat in church and worried about setting up the tables for next fundraiser? Have you ever sat in church and wondered why no one supports your event? Has anyone here ever

gone to church and felt distracted by life? You come to church to experience God but you miss Him because you are distracted. Is there a Felix in the house? You are a victim of your own mixed up priorities. We will pray for you. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Your Agenda

One of the saddest stories in the news lately was the news out of Oak Creek, Wisconsin. You know the story. A gun man opened fire and killed four inside a temple; three more outside the temple were killed, including the gunman. It was a hate crime and many were shocked. However, there was one church that applauded the action. The Westboro Baptism Church just minutes after the shooting tweeted these words: GOD SENT ANOTHER SHOOTER? How could a church communicate such a thing? Did you know the word love is found in the Bible 551 times? That church must have read about love at least once but they didn't hear a word. They had their own agenda. They had their own political agenda. Have you ever gone to church with your own agenda?

Second, if you want to worship God then you have to forget about your agenda. I don't mean an ugly sinful agenda. I mean a personal agenda that revolves around your comfort, desires and entertainment. Has anyone here ever made your personal agenda the top priority in your worship experience? If so then we are going to call you Felix. Have you ever worried more about the optimum temperature in the sanctuary than you are God? Have you ever been more worried about the music selection, style or quality than you are God? Have you ever wondered why other people and groups don't do things the right way? Everyone should listen to you because you and your group know everything. Let me say this clearly. Church is not about you; Church is not about me. Church is about God. Is there a Felix in the house? Are you a victim of your own mixed up priorities? We will pray for you. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Your Inflexibility

If you were with us last week then you will remember I preached on forgiveness. You remember the story. Esau forgave Jacob. I equated our unforgiving spirit to dead trees. When you forgive someone you cut down a dead tree in your life and are able to see the view. If you can't forgive then you don't cut the dead tree down. In the end you only hurt yourself. You know I preach these sermons every week. What you may not know is that I email these sermons out each week to others. Sometimes people respond in a positive way; sometimes they respond in a negative way. Monday morning I received a response from last week's message. The email went like this: I LIKE MY DEAD TREES! I WILL NEVER FORGIVE MY BROTHER! Is there anyone here who likes their dead trees? Is there anyone here who is inflexible? If you are not open to change then why come to church at all? Is there a Felix in the house? Are you a victim of your own mixed up priorities? We will pray for you. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Let me end with this old preaching story.

One of the greatest hymns in the history of the church is *Amazing Grace*. It was written by John Newton. The words of that hymn were his testimony. He experienced God's amazing grace and became a believer. He became a preacher. He went all over England sharing his faith. Well past his "retirement" age, he had to have an assistant stand in the pulpit with him on Sundays. He was nearly blind and spoke in whispers, but nothing could keep him from preaching while he still had breath. One Sunday, while delivering his message he repeated the sentence: "Jesus Christ is precious." His helper whispered to him: "But you have already said that twice." Newton turned to his helper and said loudly, "Yes, I've said it twice, and I'm going to say it again." They say the stones of that sanctuary shook when he said again: Jesus Christ is precious!" John Newton wasn't wrong. Jesus is precious.

Do you know why I went into the ministry? Do you know why I stay in the ministry? I didn't go into the ministry to go to Annual Conference, Spring District Conference or Charge Conference. I didn't go into the ministry to go the Administrative Board, Trustees or Finance Committee meetings. I didn't go into the ministry to be in charge of all the fundraiser or to listen to everyone's concerns. Do you know why I went into the ministry? Do you know why I stay in the ministry? I went into the ministry to talk about Jesus. John Newton was right! Jesus Christ is precious. Did anyone come to church today for any other reason than Jesus? If so then we are going to call you Felix. We are going to pray for your mixed up priorities. Francis Chan said, *"The irony is that while God doesn't need us but still wants us, we desperately need God but don't really want Him most of the time."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**