

SHIFT Sermon Series: INTRODUCTION
By Rev. Malcolm Smith

WHAT CAN WE SHIFT?

What can we shift about our lives? Sometimes it can seem like the things we wish would change, don't and the things we wish would stay the same, change. And a lot of it is beyond our control. So what can we shift?

We can always work on shifting how we respond to what happens in our lives. Though it doesn't always change the external circumstances of our lives, shifting how we respond can make a big difference in the quality of our lives and the lives of the people around us. And ultimately this is what spiritual work is all about—shifting from responding like an animal to responding like a human being, shifting from responding to life from a self-centered love of getting what we want to responding from a love of serving others. It's the sort of shift that Jesus called people to make when He began His public ministry by saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17).

Serenity Prayer: God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.

SMALL CHANGES. BIG DIFFERENCE.

The more we work on trying to shift how we respond to life, though, the more we become aware of how hard it can be to make that sort of shift. Bad habits and bad

patterns of thought can feel totally ingrained in us and shifting them can seem like an impossible and overwhelming task. It can feel like standing in front of a totally dilapidated house and being responsible for fixing the place up or standing at the bottom of a mountain wishing we were at the top.

...the human race throughout the whole world is under the guidance of the Lord, and... everyone from infancy even to the end of his life is led by Him in the most individual things and his place foreseen and also provided. From these things it is clear that the Divine Providence of the Lord is universal because it is in the most individual things; and that this is the infinite and eternal creation which the Lord provided for Himself by means of the creation of the universe. A person does not see anything of this universal providence; and if he did, it could not appear to him otherwise than as passers-by see the scattered heaps and collections of materials from which a house is to be built; while the Lord sees it as a magnificent palace with its work of construction and enlargement continually going on. (Divine Providence 203)

If we just think about the overall task in front of us, we'll probably give up but, if we can instead focus on what the first step is, we might be able to gradually make some progress. We start by ensuring that the foundations of the house are in good shape or clearing out all the garbage and dirt that has accumulated inside the house. We start walking up the first path into the foothills of the mountain. If we focus on what small change we can make today in how we respond to what life throws at us, we will eventually see a change.

THE STORY

The story we're going to focus on in this program is the story of the twin brothers Jacob and Esau. And it's a great story. There is conflict, anger, inspiration, longing, love, grief, frustration, surprise, and joy. The brothers are in conflict with each other from the very beginning of the story and are only reconciled at the very end. The New Church teaches that their story is our story. Their conflicts, inspiration, frustration, joy etc. are what we experience as we go through the process of trying to change our lives for the better.

Those who confine themselves to the sense of the letter suppose that in the Word Jacob is used to mean every one of those people descended from Jacob, and for that reason they apply to those people everything that has been stated about Jacob either as history or as prophecy. But the Word is Divine in that first and foremost every single thing within it has regard not just to one particular nation or people but to the whole human race, namely to everyone present, past, and future. (Secrets of Heaven 3305:2)

We can think that God is just interested in ideals—the glowing picture of where we should be not the dark reality of where we sometimes are. But what we'll see in this story is the reality that He knows our dark states just as intimately as He knows where He wants to get us to. Jacob is by no means perfect and nor is Esau and yet God works with them to eventually bring them back together.

For the next 7 weeks we're going to explore the process that the Lord uses to help us shift—the small changes that make a big difference in how we respond to our lives. We will see that, while the process that the Lord has for our spiritual growth is not always easy, it is merciful, realistic, and effective.