



Reading: Genesis 32.22-32

The Message: Why do Canadian say, “I’m sorry!” all the time?

[Video](#)

There are three things most people south of the border know about Canadians. My mother in law used to marvel at how I said, “out” and “about;” and how I turned sentences into questions with the addition of “eh?.” I still don’t think the out and about comment was accurate. But I know I say “eh?” a lot.

And we are known for saying “I’m sorry.” I dare say when we travelled, we learned, “I’m sorry” in other languages before anything else.

“Eh?” is easy to explain. It replaces “N’est-ce pas?” from the French, so my own rationale is that the influence comes from our bilingual heritage.

But I’m sorry? I have my own interpretation for the origin of that too.

First, let’s think about my favourite ‘I’m sorry’ story: the story of Jacob, who really was a cad, cheating his older brother out of his inheritance, disrespecting his father, leaving his mother and taking off to live the high life. But then he decided to apologize -- to return to his brother and make peace.

Two ways of saying ‘I’m sorry:’

1. First he sent a message, which resulted in his brother Esau amassing 400 and going to meet him -- which kind of terrified Jacob.
2. Then he sent a gift of
 - a. 200 female goats and 20 male goats,
 - b. 200 ewes and 20 rams,
 - c. 30 mother camels and their colts,
 - d. 40 cows and 10 bulls,
 - e. 20 female donkeys and 10 male donkeys.

telling the ranch hands to each give the message that these were gifts to Esau from Jacob.

The repetition is significant:

1. first apology,
2. then gift after gift after gift --the second apology is recompense.

For he thought, ‘I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me.’

3. But there was something missing

So he escorted his whole posse across the Jabbok river. Then he went back over to camp on the other side. And during the night, he struggled with ... a man? A messenger from God? God? -- or as Hosea describes it, an angel?

He struggled till dawn, and we know that he couldn't have won, because this messenger from God just had to touch his hip to permanently disable him. But he wanted a blessing from God, he wanted to see the face of God -- he wanted to be reconciled with God. And as he limped off as the sun rose, with that constant reminder of God's presence in his sciatic nerve, he was finally prepared to reconcile with his brother. Jacob received his blessing and was renamed Israel which means 'contends with God,'

1. Saying I'm sorry,
2. seeking to make amends,
3. and most important of all, struggling with God to seek God's blessing.

Second, let's look at the idea of trying to go it alone. Moses had been doing all the judging of the people before his father in law arrived to bring his daughter and grandchildren back to Moses, perhaps after Moses sent them back to Midian during the plagues in Egypt.

It wasn't that Moses was unfit to hear their disputes; it wasn't that he didn't care about their disputes; it wasn't that the job was beneath him, it wasn't that the people didn't want Moses to hear their disputes.

The problem was simply that the job was too big for Moses to do. To take on the sins of the people and seek to sort them all out was too much for one man in Jethro's opinion. Being known as a people who say 'I'm sorry,' is a wonderful thing. We are all sorry, all of the time, for the things that hurt others.

Apologizing on behalf of others.

When I was a theological student, I suffered tremendously from the treatment of fellow students and faculty who did not believe that women should be ordained.

At one point, a supportive professor, George Johnston, who was involved in the founding of St. Stephen's on the Hill when he taught New Testament at Emmanuel College, apologised on behalf of his Anglican colleagues when I was treated particularly shabbily. And he, good Scot that he was, quoted an obscure 19th Century Scottish theologian named John McLeod Campbell to do it.

Despite the fact that the Campbells and the Murrays were often at each other's throats, I was intrigued by what McLeod Campbell called 'vicarious repentance.' After ordination, he was settled in a church in Rhu on the Gareloch and the Clyde coast. There, drunkenness, fights and smuggling were commonplace. People prayed to avoid the anger of God, but then kept on sinning. The practice of religion seemed to him hypocritical, joyless and depressing.

By carefully reading the early church and reformation theologians, Campbell came to believe that God offered all souls salvation. It was enough that Jesus said, "I'm sorry for the sins of all humanity." He apologized vicariously for all of us.

When we say "I'm sorry," several times a day, I don't think it minimizes the apology -- rather Christ stood in for all of us. -- you stand in for the person who should apologize

The words, "I'm sorry." are among the most powerful words in any language and in any situation. Canadians are used to saying, "I'm sorry." This is a strong value we need to practice more. So

keep apologizing when you accidentally step into someone's physical space. But also, try saying you're sorry for the things you didn't do -- not just something someone thinks you did but -- for something that someone else did or did not do that hurt someone else.

Apologizing when you know you haven't done anything wrong -- that's perhaps one of the most difficult apologies, but practicing that can prepare you for vicarious repentance.

One of my students presented a case study on a situation that was still bothering her from years past. The church was in the midst of tryouts for the children's play. The wife of a colleague exploded in fury at my student when her child didn't get the lead part.

Things went downhill in so many ways with the whole ministry of the church and the relationships of staff, until my student apologised. She had no involvement in the casting decisions; the woman who exploded didn't have a valid reason for her anger. But there was no way past this until my student apologized.

Jesus had no responsibility for our sin, but he apologized anyway. The son of humanity came to give his life for many (Mark 4.45). He created a pathway to reconciliation with God; he created a pathway to salvation for the world.

Paul taught us to "bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." (Colossians 3.13)

We make allowances for others because of love.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is one example of the whole of our country attempting to say, "I'm sorry" on behalf of people who lived decades ago. Living out the recommendations from that report is a Canadian thing to do.

1. Saying I'm sorry
2. Making Amends
3. Struggling with God to seek God's blessings
4. Saying I'm sorry with others
5. Saying I'm sorry for the sins of others.

"I'm sorry" is a Canadian tradition. It's also the Christian thing to do!