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Jungian Reflections on Jesus from the “Second Half of Life”

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11 March 2018

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Fifteen years ago, I graduated seminary and moved to northeast Louisiana, where I served for seven years as the Associate Pastor at a liberal Christian congregation. My eventual move six years ago from liberal Christianity to Unitarian Universalism is not as large a leap as one might think. Indeed, from the early days of what became Unitarianism and Universalism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries all the way through most of the nineteenth-century, almost all of our Unitarian and Universalist forebears were theologically liberal Christians. The tide did not begin to shift decisively until the early twentieth century Humanist Controversy, and the Christian tradition remains the Fourth of our UU Six Sources.

This summer, when UU General Assembly happened to be in Louisiana, I was honored to be invited to preach again at that liberal Christian church that had been my first congregation as a full-time, professional minister. And in preparing that sermon, I realized that I was scheduled to preach almost fourteen years ago to the day I first arrived to serve that congregation. Moreover, I realized that meant I had been away from that congregation for seven years, which is exactly the same number of years that I had served there. And I want to invite us to reflect on some insights that are sometimes possible only with the passage of time.

In 2003, when I first began preaching as an ordained minister, I was twenty-five years old and fresh out of seminary. Yesterday, I turned forty. At least so far, turning forty has not been particularly traumatic. I experienced greater cognitive dissonance when I turned thirty-five. Suddenly I found myself no longer invited to check the “*Young*

Adult” box (which typically ranges from ages eighteen to thirty-four). I found that marketers—or sociologists or whoever designs those little boxes—were now categorizing me in the “thirty-five to forty-four” age bracket. Demographically, I found myself deemed to be not a “Young Adult,” but an “Adult Adult.”

There are some advantages to being younger. As Philip Roth said, “Old age isn't a battle: old age is a massacre.” But there is also wisdom that sometimes only comes with time and experience. And I suspect some of you can relate to seeing the world differently now than you once did. Indeed, in the words of a famous proverb, there are ways that **“We see the world not as it is, but as we are.”**

One of the classic turning points in which such a paradigm shift can happen is during midlife. The psychoanalyst Carl Jung (1875-1961) called this transition the “second half of life.” He said, **“One cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning; for what was great in the morning will be of little importance in the evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening become a lie.”** Getting that order mixed up tends to result in a midlife crisis!

As an example of how this has played out in my life, let me tell you about how my perspective has changed about scripture passages Matthew 10:5-16, which I interpret quite differently today compared to 2003, when I was a newly ordained Christian pastor. Part of the reason for that shift has to do with learning more about non-canonical texts like the Didache. But another major reason is that my worldview has changed: *“We see the world not merely as it is, but as we are.”*

As a younger man, solidly within what Jung called the “first half of life,” my inclination would have been to interpret Jesus’s words, quite literally, as a challenge to all followers of Jesus, including myself and the other members of my congregation, to radically change our lives. For what it’s worth, both then and now, I think that was Jesus’s intention. Keep in mind that in my early days as a pastor—when I was most inclined to preach this radical message—I was in my mid-twenties. And I don’t think it is a coincidence that when the historical Jesus preached those words he was likely in his late twenties. He was a relatively young man. And it was to even younger men—likely, teenagers—that he gave these instructions:

Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. (Matthew 10:8-11)

This is not to say that one can only be radical in one's youth, but there does tend to be a greater openness to giving up everything and following the latest radical leader in what Jung called the "first half of life."

And there are stories I could tell you, from my early twenties, of living for brief periods of time in a few different intentional communities, of organizing protests against the Iraq War, and other such adventures. But looking back, I can also now see that there are ways in which the window for radical response was closing by the time I accepted my first call as a full-time professional pastor. Said more strongly, accepting that paid position was itself a compromise from Jesus' original call. After all, I didn't move to Louisiana to spend seven years following Jesus for free. I negotiated a contract. The congregation paid me a salary with benefits.

After being there two years, I bought a house. But that's not how Jesus's standing operating procedure imagined it. Rather, he said:

Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.

(Matthew 10:11-15)

How can would-be Jesus followers who have a permanent address reconcile that choice with Jesus's original vision that his followers would (like him) be homeless, itinerant peasants?

If we skip ahead nine chapters in Matthew's Gospel, we can read Jesus's clear answer to what *homeowners* should do:

21 Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." 22 When the young man heard this

word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions. 23 Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

There was a time when I wanted to be perfect—at least that’s what I thought I wanted. These days I feel like being “perfect” (whatever that even means) might be a goal that better fits with the first half of life. In this season of my life, I’m trying to be more compassionate with myself and others, more honest about my limitations, and more open to being imperfect—to being *human*.

There is another important twist to this story that was also less obvious to me earlier in my life and much more clear to me now. (“*We see the world not as it is, but as we are.*”) That twist is that Jesus’s standard operating procedure itself requires that not everyone be a homeless peasant. If Jesus’s young disciples are going to follow his instructions, they need *householders* to visit. Otherwise, there would be no homes for the disciples to deem worthy or unworthy, no houses on which they might leave their peace or shake off the dust from their feet, no hearths at which they might eat in exchange for all that sick-curing, dead-raising, leper-cleansing, and demons-exorcising.

So for any of you who continue to find value in Jesus’s ethics but are either unable or unwilling to enact what we might consider Jesus’s Plan A (“be perfect, sell your possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow Jesus), I invite you to consider “Plan B.” But to get to Plan B, I need to invite you on a brief detour through the Hebrew Bible.

You may recall that near the end of this reading from Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.” Modern debates about same-sex relationships have gotten many people confused about Sodom and Gomorrah. But if you read the full context of that story in Genesis 18, you will see that the sin in this infamous “clobber passage”—a passage people use to beat each other up with—the sin is not homosexuality, but *inhospitality* to strangers. The concern is not the *presence* of

consensual, adult, same-sex relationships in Sodom, but the *absence* of social justice. Ezekiel 16:49 explicitly confirms this view: **“This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.”**

In light of that passage from Ezekiel, we can form a “Plan B” along these lines:

- Instead of “be perfect,” be *humble*.
- Instead of “sell everything,” *share* with those who have less than you. If you have more money than time, give generously to support social justice movements and organizations. If you have more time than money, volunteer with social justice causes that need your help.
- If you are in a state of prosperous ease, be *hospitable* to those who are poor and needy.

Importantly, I am not the first person to flip the script on Jesus’s instructions to his disciples. In addition to the small number of books eventually collected into the anthology we call the “New Testament,” early Christians wrote many other documents. Perhaps the most helpful of these first-century documents—from a householder perspective—is called the Didache, which literally means “The Teaching,” related to our English word *didactic*. This ancient book is dated to the mid-to-late first century. It was thought lost, only to surprisingly be rediscovered in a church library in Turkey in 1873. (Jones 4-5). As late as the fourth-century, some prominent early Christian writers, such as Eusebius (c. 263–339 C.E.) and Athanasius (c. 296-373 C.E.), “even considered it to be on the fringe of the New Testament canon.” But it was ultimately not influential in enough geographical areas to make the final cut (Metzger 49).

The Didache is, in many ways, a manual for adapting the way of Jesus to the duties and concerns “of family, of occupation, of home—the very things that Jesus and his wandering apostles had left behind” (Milavec, x). Related to Jesus instructions, the Didache attests that charismatic followers of Jesus’ way are continuing to circulate and claim to speak prophetically for God in exchange for temporary room and board. And as we heard the reading from Chapter 11 of the Didache, the need is clear for householders to practice hospitality. It says, “Welcome the teacher when he comes to instruct you” (11:1).

And whereas Jesus's instructions focus on whether a house or town is *worthy* of receiving peace, the Didache's instructions are written from the opposite perspective. Their question is whether yet-another traveling disciple is a *legitimate or illegitimate* teacher of Jesus's way. In the tradition of all those throughout history who have been fooled by hucksters, charlatans, and con men — offering a hope for healing that turns out to be snake oil, the Didache is interested in a litmus test for distinguishing true prophets from false prophets. Whereas Jesus says, "Be perfect," the Didache is pragmatic: "For if you are able to bear the entire yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect; but if you are not able, then *at least do what you can*" (6:2). There is a similar pragmatism regarding prophets: "by their fruit you will know them" (Didache 11:8; Matthew 7:16).

What does prophetic fruit look like? It is also noteworthy that the Didache has a brief description of true prophets, who "teach so as to increase righteousness and the knowledge of the Lord...and have the ways of the Lord about [them]" (11:2, 8). But it has a much longer list of how to identify *false* prophets—a guide to spotting spoiled prophetic fruit, I guess! One of my favorites is, "If the prophet stays three days, the prophet is false." We can see here that the Didache community seemed to be familiar with Jesus' commission for his followers to travel itinerantly without food, possessions, or money. If someone stayed in one place too long, they risked exploiting the gift of hospitality.

Also in line with Jesus' charge to his followers, the Didache cautions, "When the apostle goes away, let the apostle take nothing but bread to last until the next night of lodging," and "If the prophet asks for money, the prophet is a false one" (11:6). The Didache continues, "If he wants to stay with you, and is an [artisan], let him work for his living. But if he has no trade, use your judgment in providing for him; for a Christian should not live idle in your midst" (12:3-4). In addition, I love that the text warns further that, "If he is dissatisfied with this sort of an arrangement, he is a Christ-peddler. Watch that you keep away from such people" (12:5). Perhaps we need to bring the term "Christ-peddler" back into circulation for those who claim to be a *prophet*, but are truly interested only in their own *profit*.

I should probably also be clear that the perspective I have been sharing is, of course, not necessarily the only or best interpretation of these texts, or of the Christian tradition for all times and places. Rather, it is simply how I see things in this season of my life. And my mind may continue to change. After all, “*We see the world not merely as it is, but as we are.*” For now—whatever our age and whatever our situation in life—may we each increasingly use whatever resources are at our disposal to act in this world with more humility, more generosity, more hospitality, more peace, and more love.