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The Second Half of Life:

A Sermon for the Ordination of Kathryn Adams

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Kathryn, what a joy to celebrate your ordination. When you first arrived at UUCF in the fall of 2021 to begin your two-year internship, you had already enjoyed successful careers in medicine, military service, and policy/grant-writing — not to mention yoga instruction — on the side. Nevertheless, you sensed that your vocational trajectory remained incomplete. You felt a call to ministry.

As I was reflecting on what to say on this your ordination day, I stumbled upon these words from a recently published book titled Reflections on the Life and Dreams of C.G. Jung: From Conversations with Jung by Aniela Jaffé that perhaps speak to part of why you would go through the many, many, *many* steps that are required to become a Unitarian Universalist minister, instead of remaining content with any one of your previous successful careers. Jung writes:

People do not realize just how much they are putting at risk when they *don't* accept what life presents them with, the questions and tasks that life sets them....

I have come to the conclusion that it is better to live what one really is and accept the difficulties that arise as a result — because avoidance is much worse....

Suffering [is] inevitable in any case. But I want to suffer those things which really belong to me.... In old age it is not the wonderful

things that we perhaps missed out on seeing or experiencing that we will regret, but rather the moments when we let life pass us by. (13-14)

Kathryn, we are gathered here to celebrate that you have not let your call to UU ministry pass you by!

Allow me to add one more quote from Jung which underscores that in no sense are you missing out on anything by coming to UU ministry in midlife. Our living tradition *gains* so much from your previous experience! Jung challenges us all to consider that there may be something in particular to pay attention to in the changes we humans feel compelled to make in what he called the “second half of life.” And he’s not talking about buying a sports car! In his words: **“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.”**

Since Kathryn and I share a heritage of Christianity as a significant part of our “first half of life,” I want to invite us to go deeper into Jung’s quote, using the lens of the Christian tradition. Our perspectives can change in quite interesting ways as we enter what Jung called “the second half of life because,” as a wisdom teaching puts it, “We see the world not merely as *it* is, but as *we* are.”

Let me give you an example: When I was a newly ordained minister back in 2003, I related to some of Jesus’s sayings quite differently than I do today. Back in my mid-twenties, within what Jung called the “first half of life,” my inclination was to interpret Jesus’s words *literally*, as a challenge to all of us to radically change our lives. It’s no coincidence that when the historical Jesus preached those words he was likely in his late twenties. And it was to even younger men — likely, teenagers — that he gave these instructions in the 10th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew, verses 8-11:

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.

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 in the “first half of life.”

There are other stories I could tell you — of living for brief periods in different intentional communities, of organizing protests against the Iraq War, among other such adventures. But looking back, I can see that there are ways in which my window for a certain kind of radicality was closing by the time I accepted my first call as a full-time professional minister. Indeed, accepting a paid position was itself a compromise from Jesus' original call. I didn't move to a distant state or follow Jesus for free. I negotiated a contract. The congregation paid me a salary with benefits.

After two years, I bought a house, which is not how Jesus's standard 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)

Unlike the historical Jesus, I am not an itinerant rabbi. Today, I have a wife, a mortgage, a seven-month old son and a full-time job. If we skip ahead nine chapters in Matthew's Gospel, we can read Jesus's clear answer to what he thought *homeowners* like me should do:

Jesus said to [the rich, young ruler], "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." (verse 21)

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 better suited to the first half of life. These days, 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 twist to this story that was also less obvious to me in the first half of my life: Jesus's standard operating procedure 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 upon which they might leave their peace or from which to 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.

Our Unitarian Universalist living tradition has always been more interested in emulating *Jesus's ethics* than in worshipping Jesus. But for any of us either unable or unwilling to enact what we might consider Jesus's "Plan A," I invite you to consider his "Plan B." But to get to Plan B, I need to invite us all upon a brief detour through the Hebrew Bible.

Near the end of that passage 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 so-called 'sin' in this infamous clobber passage is not homosexuality, but *inhospitality*. The concern is not the *presence* of consensual, adult, same-sex relationships in Sodom, but the *absence* of generous 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," we can be *humble*.
- Instead of "sell everything," we can *share* with those who have less than we do.
- If we are in a state of prosperous ease, we can be *hospitable* to those who are poor and needy.

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. Among the most helpful, from a householder's perspective, is called the *Didache* — literally, "The Teaching," a word related to our English word *didactic*.

This ancient book dates to the mid-to-late first century. It was thought lost, only to surprisingly be rediscovered in a library in Turkey in 1873. (Jones 4-5). As late as the

fourth-century, some prominent early Christian writers “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). The Didache attests that charismatic followers of Jesus’ way are continuing to circulate and speak prophetically for the divine in exchange for temporary room and board. And in 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* earlier instructions focus on whether a house or town is worthy of receiving peace, the Didache’s instructions are written from the *opposite* perspective. We could think of the Didache as a supplement to the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — as perhaps “The Gospel According to *Householders*.” For householders, their writers’ question is focused upon whether yet-another traveling disciple knocking on the door is a *legitimate or illegitimate* teacher. In the tradition of all those who have been fooled by hucksters, charlatans, and con men offering a hope that turns out to be snake oil, the Didache is seeking a litmus test for distinguishing true and false prophets.

Whereas Jesus says, “Be perfect,” the Didache is *pragmatic*. It says, “For if you are able to bear the entire yoke...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). That verse always makes me think of a bumper sticker I used to see in the South. It said: “God wants *spiritual* fruits, not religious nuts.”

It is also noteworthy that the Didache has only a brief description of “true prophet,” but a much longer list of how to identify *false* prophets — a guide to spotting spoiled prophetic fruit. One of my favorites is, “**If the prophet stays three days, the prophet is false.**” The Didache community seemed to be familiar with Jesus’ commission for his followers to travel *itinerantly* without food, possessions, or money. If someone stays in one place too long, they risk 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 [one] should not live idle in your midst" (12:3-4). 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 more interested in their own *profit*.

The perspective I have been sharing is by no means the only or best interpretation of these texts, or of the Christian tradition. It is simply how I have come to see things in this season of my life. My mind will surely continue to change. "*We see the world not merely as it is, but as we are.*"

For now, I will say that I look forward, Kathryn, to all that you will bring to our living tradition in *this season* of *your* life. We do not need for you to be perfect. May you — may I, may we — use our gifts and our calling to act in this world with more humility, more generosity, more hospitality, more peace, and, *most centrally*, with more love.