Becoming Your True Self[i]

Genesis 32:24-30; Matthew 5:43-48

Our second reading comes from the end of the Sermon on the Mount, which summarizes Jesus' teaching. I read from Matthew 5:43 **43** “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor[i] and hate your enemy.’ **44** But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, **45** that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. **46** If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Don’t mafia bosses do that? **47** And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even your enemy nations do that? **48** Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

I read this last line as it is written in the Bibles you have because the translation is poor. We are not asked to become perfect, as in ‘make no mistakes whatsoever’. We are asked to become perfect in the sense of ‘complete yourself’, ‘complete your destiny’. As we would say today, ‘find yourself’… who you are more deeply.

And we know ourselves pretty well…… until we don’t. Then it is disconcerting. You might feel this a few times in your life, but this is a midlife text. That is when you feel it the most acutely.

You are raising your kids, and they are starting to grow up. You’ve been fairly successful in your job. You are paying your bills. You go home for the holidays; perhaps you see some friends from High School or college, or relatives you’ve been

close to for a long time. You're driving back home after the holiday, only this time you are really flat, suddenly emptier than usual, but it is fall; it could just be the weather.

Other times, it lands on you more like a crisis. Sometimes a job goes sideways. The economy shifts, your industry changes, or, for whatever reason, your job simply ends unexpectedly. Of course, your first reaction is to freak out because of economic fear and the uncertainty of replacing your income and status.

Whether it is a crisis or something that has been slowly degrading for a while, you find yourself unable to sleep and terminally anxious, brooding, pacing the floor. You're up in the middle of the night, awakened by dreams that won't resolve themselves, and you can't change the channel. To be fair, a lot

is going on here, and much of that emotional roil is real on its own terms.

But suddenly, you are feeling hollow, like you are not sure who you are, like you don't recognize yourself. You start wondering about the past, about all the things you've dedicated your life to doing. Has this been me? Really me? And who am I anyway? I've spent the last twenty years trying to become a successful person, a responsible person, a self-directed person. All of a sudden, none of it feels real, and I can't just make a few small changes to make it feel right again. I feel like I am slipping away from myself.

For a moment, you are living a kind of "Talking Heads" experience: "And you may tell yourself, 'This is not my beautiful

house. And you may tell yourself, 'This is not my beautiful wife.'"

And you are unraveling. Underneath all the outside things that brought you to this moment, at the most basic level, this is also about you. You feel like you might be having a nervous breakdown because you realize that you are living a life that someone else defined for you. They told you that you were going to be happy when you followed this path, copied this pattern, lived the so-called "good life," and you would be happy. But you're not. And for the longest time, days unto weeks, all you can think about is how 'this is not working' and 'I can't do this' and 'I want out'.

Most of the time, all of this negativity and turmoil are collective symptoms of your true self trying to emerge.

Subconsciously, you know you need to grow in a different direction than the one you've been in. The deeper anxiety you feel comes from the fact that you are trying to hold onto an old version of you that has been disintegrating for quite some time and has just recently passed a point of no return, so that it is going away.

Looking back, you can see how you've tried to distract yourself for quite a while. You took on more work, a new house, better travel, and recognition, but none of it could really cover the fact that you were still thinking to yourself, "Is this all there is?" Because I'm not getting it. "Do I have to settle for this?" Tell me that I'm missing something here.

The Bible was written before the advent of modern psychology, so we don't get these insights into mid-life crises

laid out as we think about them today. Instead, we get this imaginative story of Jacob, also in mid-life. He is estranged from his brother, doesn't want to be, but he is. He is deeply unhappy about it.

Like us, he can't sleep at night. An Angel visits him, and he has to wrestle with it all night when he should be at rest, until daylight dawns; but Jacob won't let go of this Angel (or is it a demon) until he gets a blessing. Jacob has to resolve this even if it kills him. He wrestles, and he wrestles. Finally, the Angel blesses him. The Angel changes his name. He used to be called "Jacob," which literally means 'heel' because he is a twin, and when he was born, he was holding on to his brother Esau's heel.

And that word “Jacob,” or “heel,” came to mean “Slick cheater” in Hebrew because Jacob later stole his brother’s inheritance (another way of grabbing his heel), which is why they hadn’t spoken to each other for years. Brothers can be like that, and arguments about your parents' estate can last for years, can they?

The Angel gives him a new name, “Israel,” which literally means ‘One who strives with God’ and lives to tell about it. That is the name that we call the Jews today. Israel. Not the people with all the answers, but the people willing to wrestle with God. In Jacob’s case, the new name signals that his old self is no longer his identity. He is growing in a new direction, becoming a new man in the process.

Jacob's anxiety is directed at problems of his own causing in the past, but it really portends a new avatar of his soul, the better version of himself that he is about to manifest. It is curious, like that, in these crises that ***"the you"*** that emerges from the storms of your life is not ***"the you"*** that entered those storms. That is the painful but profound truth you discover in retrospect. You become more emotionally aware, particularly of what you need. You focus on developing deeper relationships. Your personal values orient you. A clearer sense of purpose points you toward a new future. This future focuses more on establishing an authentic identity.

You are no longer beguiled by other people's visions of what the successful life looks like. You want to actualize what is really real about your life. What part of you is aching to be

born? It is not good enough anymore to just patch this crisis over. This has become a moment to be honest with yourself.

And in that difficult space to be, full of a burning desire to be honest with yourself and real about the future, you stop asking ‘Why is God doing this to me?’ And you start asking, ‘What is this impasse trying to teach me?’ How do I need to grow and change?

As it turns out, your life can’t be controlled like a script; you are constantly evolving, outgrowing the person you used to be, and no longer willing to live someone else's vision of what you need. Instead, you have a vague sense that the changes you are going through are really a version of you that you were always meant to be. That freedom has integrity.

And the older we get, the more important it becomes that we are true to ourselves, that we are actualizing who we are meant to become. It is where our deeper meaning comes from. As Winston Churchill liked to remark, “Never let a good crisis go to waste”.

Our second reading this morning comes from the end of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount distills the ideals and values God intends for us, bringing us not just life but abundant life. Then we get this concluding remark: ‘Become complete, even as God is complete. Lean into real fulfillment, spiritual fulfillment. Don’t be afraid to let go of previous versions of yourself. Don’t be afraid to let go of the well-meaning advice of the previous generation, which had a defined vision of what they thought you needed to become independent and thrive.

We are all works in progress. And the greatest form of love comes from the people around you who inspire you to become a better version of yourself, the people who seem to sense when you actualize your real self and point that out for you. They are the people who give you permission to step out and break new ground so you can become you.

Carl Jung famously remarked that this is the point of the life cycle. He thought that the point of our personal evolution is to become more of ourselves, more of who we are when we grow into more profound versions of ourselves.

May you have the confidence and courage to see through the fear of the crisis in your life to the promise. May you stumble upon the honesty to ask yourself what you are supposed to learn from this crisis and how you need to evolve.

May you be blessed to be surrounded by people who support you, who want the best for you, who allow you to be genuinely yourself. They are the face of Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And there you will find life.

Jesus has a wonderful enigmatic saying, “Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you (my way) and learn from me, for I am gentle and honest with you, and you will find real rest. For this yoke is freedom, and this burden is not a burden at all, for you are becoming who you were meant to become. God be with you. Amen

Our first reading is important for all of us, but it is especially relevant for those of us in mid-life. You get these moments where you are really unsettled and you wish they were. You think it is all these outside

things, and it is, but there is another dimension to it that is strictly internal. There is a curious story in the book of Genesis about Jacob at mid-life. He is trying to figure out something and he can't sleep. He ends up in a wrestling match with this Angel, much like we wrestle with ourselves in our dreams. I read from Genesis 32. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. **25** When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. **26** Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

27 The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

28 Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel,[f] because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

29 Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

30 So Jacob called the place Peniel,[g] saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

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[i] My thanks to the Substack authors of "Science and Soul". The essential ideas for this sermon come from a couple re-stacks that inspired me.