

Sermon for Easter 5C  
Sunday, May 19, 2019  
“The New Normal”

Texts: John 13:31-35; Revelation 21:1-6; Acts 11:1-18

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

A few years ago there was a television show called *The New Normal*. It was a comedy about the life of a single mother and her daughter who moved in with a same-gender couple in Los Angeles who wanted a baby and hired the mother to be their surrogate. It lasted only one season, but it challenged some traditional ideas of what it means to be a family and comically brought to light a reality of life in 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As I thought about the scripture lessons for today, I couldn't help but think that the message we're supposed to take away today is that because of Jesus Christ, there is a new normal. Since the very beginning, Christians have been proclaiming that we have seen the Lord. Because of that, traditions have been challenged, the circle of faith has been widened, and the reality of salvation has spread throughout the entire world, because through Jesus Christ, there is a new normal.

Let's unpack this message in the lessons we have before us today. I'm going to explore these in the chronological order in which the story unfolds. The story begins with the Gospel. We read only five verses from the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of John just after Judas has left the company of Jesus and the other disciples to go betray Jesus. Immediately Jesus acknowledges that a new normal is taking place for him. His life is about to change dramatically and his death is both imminent and near. Then he tells his disciples, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (This should sound familiar to you from the Liturgy for Maundy Thursday.) In that moment, Jesus changed the reality of his disciples and invited them into a new normal of love and respect. Whether they realized it or not, their lives would forever be changed, as they began to carry the good news of Jesus Christ throughout the known world as the Church's first apostles.

That brings us to the lesson from Acts. This is a beautiful story. It is actually a story that begins in the previous chapter with a Roman centurion named Cornelius. Cornelius, we are told, was a "devout man who feared God with all his household." He was a devout, faithful, and righteous Jewish man. Now a centurion was in charge of a company of about a hundred

Roman soldiers, so he would have been a Roman citizen and wealthy. He had a household, which would have consisted of both his biological family as well as servants, perhaps slaves, and others who helped execute the daily life in his home. Even though Cornelius was Jewish, there were likely members of his household who were not. Then Cornelius had a dream in which an angel told him to go to Joppa and find a man named Peter and talk to him. At the same time, Peter had a vision in a dream in which he saw a bunch of animals descending from heaven on a large sheet, and a voice from heaven told him "to kill and eat." As it turned out, all of the animals on this sheet coming down from heaven were forbidden foods according to the Hebrew scriptures, the Torah. Naturally, Peter, himself a devout Jewish man, responded as one might expect; he tells the Lord, "No," that nothing profane would pass his lips. That's where Peter was suddenly invited into a new normal. The voice told him that everything God has made is clean and must not be called profane. This happened to Peter three times. There could be no clearer message: everything God has created is good and cannot be called profane. Then, he met Cornelius, and in the end, Cornelius and all his household – including non-Jews and pagans – were baptized that very day. Well, that greatly bothered the other baptized followers of Jesus, because up to this point, they were pretty much all Jews. They were God's chosen people. For the men, that meant they had to be circumcised. Up to this point the message of Christ was believed to be primarily meant for God's chosen people, the Jews. But here was a man, Cornelius, who had his entire household baptized. When we come to the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts which we read as our first lesson today, Peter is defending his action of baptizing Cornelius' entire household and family and tells about his dream. In fact, in these two chapters, the details of Peter's dream are told three times. You know when something is stated three times in the bible, and especially if it's restated within scope of two consecutive chapters, it's important. It was a message meant for the first hearers and readers of Acts, and it is a message meant for us today. Thank God for that message, or we wouldn't be allowed to eat things like bacon, ham and cheese sandwiches, or lobster. This was a new normal for Peter and for the infant Christian Church.

Finally, that brings us to the Revelation given to St. John the Divine that says, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more." In the new kingdom, there is a new normal. The old has passed away and a new world is upon us. "I am making all things new." That vision looks forward to the kingdom of

God being manifest here on earth, and in that new world there will be a new normal.

Now, fast forward to today. The message of the lessons for today couldn't be a more pertinent message for us today, because it still calls us into a new normal. The Christian life, even life itself, is about recognizing and living into a new normal. For us, our new normal is rooted in the three key directives from Acts, Revelation, and John: "Nothing God has created is profane," "See, I am making all things new," and "I give you a new commandment; that you should love one another." This means in our daily lives, in all our relationships and interactions, we must live according to the new normal. No matter whom we encounter, they matter, they are a part of God's creation, and are, therefore, not profane. We may not always like the other person, we may not always like the things they do, the places they go, the things they say, the way they believe, or the way they do church (if they do church at all!), they are still created by God and, therefore, are not profane. You know we like to put folks in boxes. Good, respectable Christians like ourselves often treat others with contempt, disrespect, dislike, and all kinds of negative attitudes, because the other person isn't the person that we think they should be. The thing about living into the new normal of the Christian life is that it's not about us; it's about listening to God and living in a way that would be well pleasing in God's sight. It means we must put away our personal agendas, we must let go of our personal hang-ups treat everyone with respect and dignity. That doesn't mean that people won't do bad things; sometimes they even do bad things to us. Sometimes we do bad things to them, but at the end of the day, we need to give it over to God and let him take care of the bad stuff. We must be forgiving and loving, and let God change hearts and minds. In God's new world the new normal is that we love one another...period! No judgment. No qualifiers. And you know what, that's hard to do and it's only through God's holding our hand and sharing the burden with us that we can do it.

Circumstances may also present new normals in our lives. When Judas left Jesus and the other disciples to betray Jesus, he created a new normal for them. Sometimes life itself throws curve balls into our routine and suddenly we find ourselves in the midst of a new normal. Our bodies age and don't work the way it used to. We get diagnosed with something that we'll have to live with for the remainder of our lives. We may be diagnosed with a terminal illness that moves death closer to our present reality. Something

may change in our family life and relationships. Disaster may strike our community, leaving us without a home. A job may change. Church may be different from the way it used to be.

I know that there have been many changes around here. Many of you are feeling lost, confused, not sure of what's going on. Many of you don't feel connected to what's going on here. I have heard a lot of rumblings and discontent about how you're not feeling a connection to our new liturgies or to unfamiliar music. You're feeling like you aren't a part of what's going on around here. But, the message for today is one of extreme inclusion. In the story from the Acts of the Apostles, Peter got a message from God that was loud and clear: everyone – Gentiles and Jews alike – can be part of the great Jesus movement and all may participate. You need to know that what we do here can't happen if you don't participate. All of the stuff that we do up here (in the chancel), all of the music that the choir does, all of the strange new things mean nothing if you aren't a part of it. If there is stuff that you don't understand or aren't connecting to, please ask. Don't respond to the things that you don't understand by rejecting them or complaining about them to your church buddies. Be curious. Ask questions about the things you're not getting. Those of us who know want to help you understand. I want you to get it. Over the coming weeks and months, during the summer especially, I will be preaching more about the things that might be unfamiliar and there will be opportunities after mass to learn more, but I need you to tell me what you're not getting so that I can teach you. No question is a bad question. I want you to feel comfortable with the new normal of how we worship, sing, and praise God. What we're doing up here isn't going away anytime soon.

There are all kinds of ways that life's circumstances redirect us into a new normal. But the good news in all of this is that through all the changes and chances of this mortal life, God walks with us in the midst of all of our new normals, and he helps get us through it. All we need to do is believe, pray, stay connected. If we allow our personal hang-ups and discomforts to create a barrier between us and God, then it makes it more difficult for us to recognize him walking with us as we live into all the new normals that life presents us. If we can just hold on to the message of Easter, if we hold fast to the message that Christ has risen indeed and that we see the risen Christ working in our lives, challenging us to live into a new normal, then we can let his light shine within us and be a beacon for others to do the same. Amen.