

Sermon for Easter 5C  
Sunday, May 15, 2021  
“New Normals”

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 the traditional ideas of what it meant to be a family and comically brought to light the reality of life in 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The message that we’re supposed to take away from today’s lessons 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, and since the beginning, we have been countercultural. For the first few centuries, Christianity was illegal. Saying you were a Christian in the Roman world could have cost you your life. But the early Christians persisted and spread the message that through Jesus Christ, there is a new normal.

Let’s look at the lessons we have for 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 just a month ago.) In that moment, Jesus changed the reality of his disciples and invited them into a new normal of unconditional 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 began 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.” In the first century, there were often Gentiles, non-Jews, who followed Jewish practices and even worshipped God in the ways that Jews did, but didn’t fully convert to Judaism—meaning, the men did not get circumcised. Cornelius was one such devout, faithful, and righteous man. A centurion was in charge of a company of about a hundred Roman soldiers, so Cornelius 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. 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 whole 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 this man, Cornelius, whose entire household was 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.

The message of the lessons for this morning is relevant for us today. The Christian life is about recognizing and living into God’s normal. The Christian life has from its very beginning been countercultural. 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 God’s 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. 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 of life and the world around us constantly 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. The changes that have occurred in all of our lives over the past two years are all too real; the world in which we live in 2022 isn't like the world we lived in in 2019. COVID has created realities that have changed our lives forever: how we interact with each other, how we socialize, how we sanitize or wash our hands more frequently, how we wear masks more often, how we attend church—in person and online. Our bodies age and don't work the way it used to. Someone may have been diagnosed with something that we'll have to live with for the remainder of our lives. Someone may have been diagnosed with a terminal illness that moved that person closer to death. Something may change in our family life and relationships. Disaster may strike our community. A job may change. Church may be different from the way it used to be.

We live in a world of constant new normals. 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 shining within us and be a beacon for others to do the same. Amen.