

## Sermon for June 14, 2020 – “Next Normal”

Sunday, Year A — Texts: Isaiah 43:15-21, Matthew 28:16-20

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Well, here we are back worshipping in the sanctuary once again. It probably isn't the way we expected it, it certainly isn't the way we envisioned it or had hoped it might be. There are less people than we're used to seeing. I'm guessing many opted to stay home and with so many of our members in the high-risk category I can't say I blame them. Those that are here are maintaining social distancing, (At least I hope you are!) Many of you are wearing face coverings. There are containers of hand sanitizer everywhere. It used to be said that the smell of coffee was the closest thing to incense in a Presbyterian church but we're not having coffee hour so now it's the smell of hand sanitizer or disinfecting wipes. But coffee hour isn't the only casualty of the pandemic. So much is missing. There's no choir. No collection. No worship leader. No sacraments, no communion or baptisms at least for the time being. But—hey—at least we're here. Right? At least it's only temporary. Isn't it? A few more weeks and things will be back to normal. Maybe. Maybe not. But we have to admit that they might not be. We may have to admit as Bob Dylan once famously sang that “...the times they are a changin'.”

I know that's not overly comforting. I recognize that for many the church has often been the one thing that's remained to some extent constant in our lives and a comfort in times of stress and strife. I know that the word “change” isn't a word we're overly fond of hearing. But we can no longer say that we don't want change because the change has already occurred. It's already here! And while the pandemic has revealed a number of good things, things that we do well of which I'll say more in a bit, it's also revealed a few “chinks in the armor” or as I've preferred to say it where our opportunities for growth lie. And as a matter of fact a whole lot Church leaders say that some of the responses to the coronavirus pandemic might help point the way to the future. They say that some of the ways in which we've responded or the way in which we've been responding during the early days of the pandemic may be worth holding onto after it passes. Now, some may think that they're out of their minds. That's understandable.

But, brothers and sisters I believe that we're at the proverbial fork in the road and we have choices to make. I think if you've done any of the introspection, any of the reflection that I talked about last week you might be inclined to agree. Granted, some of them may be easier to make than others. Some may be downright hard. But make no mistake, we must make them and meet the challenges we face head on. And as the pandemic continues to dominate the world's attention there's no accurate way to predict when things will return to “normal” if they ever do.

The phrase that's been thrown around a lot these past few months is “new normal.” Honestly, I first heard the term about ten years ago in a book about grief. Having lost a loved one we learn to live in a different way. There's been no small amount of loss during this pandemic. As I speak, there've been some 401,000 deaths worldwide, about 113,000 deaths in the United States and 2,404 in Ohio. But less quantifiable have been the losses in terms of how we live our everyday lives. Shortages of everything from toilet paper, hand sanitizer, and disinfecting wipes, to personal protective equipment, to ventilators. Relationships strained due to people being quarantined together for months on end. The fallout from jobs lost and schools being closed to name just two.

So, what are we to make of all this? How, then, do we define (or re-define?) normal in a time of constant change? The short answer, I'd say the **only** answer, is Jesus Christ. He is our “normal.” He was, is, and always will be so, in a sense, there's nothing new about it. But, speaking for myself as a pastor, being a pastor, being a follower of Jesus Christ, hasn't made life easier. If anything it's made it more difficult. I think it's safe to say that most of our lives have been affected, disrupted, by the pandemic.

As I said, there's been no small amount of loss so we really can't pretend we're immune from losses or stress-causing uncertainties. And similar to last week when I said that, I don't believe that God has sent the pandemic to punish us or to test us. I don't believe that the pandemic, as hard as things have been is any Christian's particular "cross to bear." So, we don't have to act like we feel fine in those moments when we're feeling depressed, anxious, or overwhelmed. In fact, it's unhealthy to do so. As followers of Christ we know that far from being the **cause** of the pandemic, God is present with us. We know that even as we navigate the path that's led us into what might be the darkest part of the valley of the shadow of death the Good Shepherd is indeed walking right alongside us.

Remember, the Psalms are filled with laments as well as praises and we have the freedom to express everything the psalmists expressed. And the feelings they expressed were in the **midst** of and not **instead** of trusting God. But when has trusting God ever been easy? Even the disciples, especially Thomas and Phillip, demanded proof. It has not been easy these last few months. If nothing else, we've been shown to our frustration and consternation, that we're not in control. And that's difficult, if not impossible, for us to abide. We've felt as if we controlled our church and, to some extent, that we controlled God. At the very least we thought we had a fairly good handle on God and what God was up to. But I believe that now's the time to ask ourselves "What do I need to let go?" I also believe the church must ask itself the same question. "What do WE need to let go?" Letting go is tough, remember the children's moment? We hold on to bananas in the church as if our lives depended on it. So I get that this might be a tough row to hoe here. Still, comparing the COVID-19 pandemic, to watershed events like 9/11 and World War II, there might not be a path back to where we were **before** the pandemic hit us seemingly out of nowhere.

One church expert said, "Perhaps our old playbook has become irrelevant..." believing that "we have a different kind of future in front of us" and that we must "now begin to imagine what that might look like and "may have to admit that we need to consider being church in a new way." As I said, I know that's not overly comforting and realize that may NOT be what people want to hear today or any day. Still, those who know me well know that I've long been an advocate for congregations to discover what it might look like if we took seriously the notion that WE are the church, that church is more than just a building. Of course, I'd never have wished for it this way. But I'd say that a considerable amount of good happened and so much for which to be grateful. Our use of technology has probably been the most visible. I'm seriously grateful that Bruce Smith talked me into going to Best Buy and purchase the camera that's been recording our services. I'm grateful that we had someone like Jason Dennison that knew how to expand on that! I'm grateful that so many were willing to learn how to use Zoom to hold meetings. That bit about not being able to teach an old dog new tricks? Not a problem here!

But there's been so much more. I'm grateful that even in a time of social distancing we managed to make and deliver close to 800 sandwiches to a local food bank with plans do make and deliver even more! I'm grateful that we were able to gather so much food for Westfed Food Bank. I'm grateful that folks looked for new ways to stay connected with notes and phone calls, virtual happy hours, porch visits, and the like. So good things have come from this without question. Maybe we have to look a little harder but there's so much for which we can be grateful!

And, as I said earlier, some of the responses to the pandemic might actually help point the way to the future. So, while some of the chinks in the armor were exposed, I believe that many more opportunities have presented themselves as well. Opportunities for personal spiritual growth. Opportunities for us to draw closer to God and one another. Opportunities to be open to the way God speaks in times of transformation. Opportunities to discern God's will and become more deeply aligned with what God is saying to us. Opportunities to move ever closer to being the church that God has created and called us to be, something that's never changed. Opportunities to create something of which people want to be a part.

One day this chapter will be over. We don't know when. But one day, hopefully soon but I'm not holding my breath, there will be no restrictions. Nothing holding us back. Nothing keeping us apart. We will celebrate the Lord's Supper. We will celebrate baptisms. We will pass the collection plates. We will embrace one another in fellowship. We will look deeply into the eyes of those we care about. We'll meet in committee and as a Session in person. We will have coffee hour once more!

Do I want things to return to "normal"? Sure. Do I know what that is going to look like? No. I'm sorry, but right now I have more questions than answers.

And the questions that I keep turning over in my head are; what new thing is God doing in our midst? What needs to die so that something new might emerge? What might be right in front of us if only we have the eyes to see and are willing to look? What is within earshot if only we have ears to hear and are willing to listen? I wish I could say that I knew exactly what those were going to be. I wish that along with my Doctor of Ministry degree I'd been given a set of written instructions telling me exactly what the future held for us and what God wanted us to do even if they were written on two stone tablets, which would have been really cool! I really wish that, but alas—no. No stone tablets. No burning bushes. No talking donkeys. No writing on the way. Darn it!

The only thing I DO know is that you cannot have resurrection without death. Brothers and sisters, here's the thing, maybe we don't know what the future holds, maybe we don't know what I'm calling the "next normal" will look like but we know for a fact that God still has work **for** us in the meantime and will be **with** us as we set about doing it. Jesus was pretty clear about that when He gave us His "Great Commission", when He said, **"...remember, I am with you always to the end of the age."** There's no escaping the fact that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, in the arrival of the Holy Spirit, in the rush of wind, and tongues of fire, **everything** changed. There was, without question, a "new normal." But that's how God works. That's how God has always worked which is why I'm calling what's happening the "next normal!"

And so now that we've begun the process of returning to worship, to our programs, to our committee work and so on, we have choices to make. Many choices. But I'm not sure that going back to business as usual is one of them. We must take seriously the notion that WE are the church, not the building and programs. We must recognize that what God is doing now, the "new" thing, the "next normal", can **never** be contained or limited to an hour (ish) of worship on Sunday morning. And let's face it, if our church is only as strong as our Sunday morning gatherings we got a lotta work to do!

So let's pay close attention to what's going on in our world and our city, our communities, and in the lives of those around us. And, while we're at it, let's pay even closer attention to God as we seek to discern His promises and plans **neither** of which have changed.

We all have a part in God's work, what a blessing! We get to be a part of His transforming work in our own lives, and even during times of social distancing we can still take part in Jesus' Great Commission making disciples baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them everything, sharing His life-giving message of salvation with others.

God is inviting us into a new thing, new opportunities. God is inviting us to pay attention to all the possibilities at the fork in the road. God is inviting us to go viral. To spread the love and life of Christ by what C.S. Lewis calls "good infection." I'll admit that I'm more than a little curious maybe even a bit excited to see **and** be a part of what's next!

Thanks be to God—who makes all things new!

Amen and amen.