

Zoom Worship Service
05-03-2020
"I Know Who Holds the Future"

As I was thinking about this new month of May that we are in, I began to consider some of the different realities that are certain to take place following these past weeks when most of us have been staying home to stay safe and protect others. I was challenged to consider the changes that might be in our futures.

Before I even began writing this message, I was reminded of a song that was in our hymnals at Pleasant Plain Friends, one of our favorites titled "I Know Who Holds Tomorrow." The song begins something like this:

***I don't know who holds the future, I just live for day to day;
I don't borrow from the sunshine, for it's skies may turn to gray.
Many things about tomorrow, I don't seem to understand
But I know who holds tomorrow, and I know who holds my hand.***

And it reminded me of a very familiar scripture found in Matthew 6: 25-34 that continues to be important as we forge ahead in this challenging time:

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?"

"So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

The people in Jesus' time certainly faced a number of trials and tribulations that we have never had to deal with: diseases with no cures, mental illnesses that weren't understood, tribal warfare, and never knowing if they would ever be free from the tyranny of Roman occupation. These people were taxed beyond anything we've ever faced! So when Jesus tells them not to worry, perhaps we can take comfort in those words for our time, too.

I'm sure there are many of us who have no doubt wondered what's coming next in our lives....when can we go back to eating in our favorite restaurants (one of my personal favorite questions)? When can kids (and adults) go back to school? Can I

watch sports on TV ever again? Will we have to wear facemasks forever? And when can we go back to worshipping in the meeting house?

I was reading an article by author Brian McLaren recently, and he was also thinking about changes that our society as a whole - as well as each of us - will be facing when we're on the other side of this pandemic, and he and I seem to be pondering some of the same things about our futures.

Maybe you've heard the saying, "In the school of life, first you take the test, then you learn the lesson." I guess, personally, I'd like to learn the lesson during the test to know how to proceed when it's over! I agree with McLaren that we can't return to the old normal! But are there things we can learn from what we've been going through these past two months that will help us navigate the new normal? I certainly hope so! I will agree that the 'old normal' was better for most of us than the current situation: having jobs and a paycheck, routines for our kids and grandkids, a social life, the freedom to travel, less worry about our loved ones. But there were definitely things that were wrong with the 'old normal.'

For one thing, from the government on down to every person living here, most of us never even considered the possibility of something like a pandemic totally throwing our lives into chaos, and we weren't prepared. Our leaders were focusing on other dangers - some we might not have considered to be high priorities - but something like COVID-19? Not really on anyone's radar. Another problem with the old normal was the lack of quality health care for many. Our government has invested trillions of dollars on weapons that injure and kill, but not enough on services that promote and protect the health of its citizens.

And what about this issue with the old normal? The continual issues of white supremacy, racial injustice, misogyny, and oligarchy, dividing our country into us vs. them; because these things are right here in our own Iowa neighborhoods. A Muscatine County jail administrator using Islamophobic and homophobic comments about those he was in charge of. Or the number of Chinese immigrants in our communities who are facing hostilities because of the perceived idea that China was responsible for this whole pandemic; and if you are of Chinese descent, it's YOUR fault.

And another reason the old normal isn't sustainable is because of the harm we are doing to our planet that we all have to share.

But probably the biggest problem is that the 'old normal' was based on the lie that we're all islands, individuals consumed by our own self-interests, believing we live in the most perfect country in the world (and the belief that our boundaries would protect us). We shared a belief that if we just worked hard enough and made enough money, there would never be anything that could harm us. This lie has told us that our survival depends on our self-interest. And I think we've found out that there is a new normal in this lesson we are learning.

Here's the 'new normal' that I think we are slowly beginning to understand: we are all connected – from our participation with others in our small neighborhoods, to our states, countries, and the entire global community. This is an ecosystem that requires us to seek the common good with one another and with our fellow earthly creatures.

Just last November when I was walking in the streets of Shanghai, as well as in many of the other Asian countries we visited – I remember observing so many living there wearing face masks. I thought – how lucky we are to be living in the United States where we don't have to wear face masks for fear we might catch some terrible disease! Surprise: 4 months later, I'm putting on a mask just to go to the grocery store!

This new global interconnectedness simply means that our survival depends on love, mutual concern, being our brother's and sister's keepers, and a commitment to working for the common good of *all* living on this earth we share.

THIS is what Jesus was trying to tell his followers in these chapters in Matthew commonly referred to as The Sermon on the Mount. The heart of his teaching was to get his followers to stop trying to be like the empire builders (the Romans) and start imitating the things in nature and putting our trust in God's ecosystem, an interdependence where everyone is working together as one.

So what does this 'new normal' look like for us? Maybe it starts when we stop thinking only about ourselves as individuals and begin to seek the common good. There have been so many examples of this during our time of testing these past months- people making face masks by the dozens, companies like Ford and GM retooling their factories to make ventilators at cost; and in our own communities we have small businesses making hand sanitizers, face masks, and other protective equipment for our health care providers. Companies figuring out what they need to do to protect their workers when they return to their jobs on an assembly line. Suddenly it's not just about 'us,' but about 'them,' too, and how we can help.

I'm certain that in the days ahead as we start to consider what the future will offer for this 'new normal' living, there will be some nostalgia for the 'good old days' that we sometimes hear older folks harken back to, even though we often laugh at that idea. We know those past days weren't always so good, especially compared to all of us with our modern conveniences. Nostalgia is not a good survival strategy; so let's think creatively about what a better and brighter future might hold.

What if we seriously check the voting records of our elected officials and ask ourselves who is actually practicing Jesus' commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves; and then voting accordingly? And what if we start imagining a better way to manage health care that is equal to all and helps keep us globally connected?

And maybe for us as 'the church,' can we imagine what kind of church will be needed as we go forward? A church that doesn't wrap itself up in isolation because we have 'the truth?' Can we be a group of believers who refuses to insulate ourselves from the problems of not only our communities, but the world as a whole? Isn't that what our Quaker ancestors were dreaming of when they came to a new land for religious freedom? A place where they would not be forced to follow the religion of the government?

You may hear two conflicting philosophies about the future: 'the government is the solution to all our problems,' or 'the government has no business in our personal lives and freedoms'. But what if we would realize our future happiness and health will depend on each of us doing our part, along **with** our elected officials in the government?

And on a personal level?

- Can I quit blaming those who don't share my opinions, and simply start planning ways I can make a difference for others?
- Can I trust my future to the God of Creation, feeding the birds and caring for the lilies of the field?
- Can I forget about the old normal and look at ways to support others, not just in this country, but all around the world?
- That's what love does; and that's what God does.

I John 4: 11-12 reminds us:

"Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and God's love is made complete in us."

When I was first thinking about this subject of what the future might hold, and the trust in God it will take to reach this new normal, I think we can always learn from those who have gone before us in difficult times, and Victor Frankl, an Austrian neurologist and psychologist, was one of those who survived not only in one concentration camp, but in four different camps including Auschwitz. Frankl gives us these five things he did to survive – things that we can also chose to do.

- 1-Frankl chose to keep the images of his loved ones close, to keep his hope alive.
- 2-He was faithful with daily prayer.
- 3-He continued to look for the beauty in nature. For Frankl, it was the setting sun shining through the Bavarian woods, or the light in a distant farmhouse one bitter cold, predawn morning when he was forced to march for hours without food.
- 4-He kept a grim sense of humor. And finally,
- 5-He chose to always remember gratitude for small things; in his case it was having enough light before bed to delouse himself; otherwise he would be awake half the night from the biting creatures.

None of us are in a prison camp facing almost certain death; we haven't been forced to march in the cold without food; we can go for walks outside and enjoy nature, and we are free to move about in our vehicles if we choose in order to get supplies. But we are all faced with the challenge of forgetting the old normal, and working toward a new, better relationship with all those with whom we share this beautiful planet.

Don't worry, trust God – that was Jesus' advice that we *still* need to follow in the upcoming days and weeks as we enter this 'new normal'.