

“Loving the New Normal”

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

Imagine you were born in 1919, 105 years ago. Your parents immigrated from Slovakia to the coal mining country of PA where your father worked in a coal mine. You're the youngest of 7 children being raised in the Slovak Lutheran Church.

At age 11, in 1930, the Great Depression of the 1930's becomes your new normal. You are blessed because your father is able to buy several coal mines during the depression so that your family is never in want. You get married in 1940 at the beginning of WW II. You live in a one-bedroom house into which your first son was born. Your new normal.

Jack and Heinz in Maple Heights is building airplanes for the war effort. You move to Cleveland where they need machinists. Your new normal is living on the first floor of a double at E. 115th and Superior into which a second son is born. A German family lives upstairs which has brought the FBI to your house to vet the Germans because their two sons are fighting in the German army. When you change jobs, you buy a new house in Bedford Heights where your 2 sons graduate from Bedford H.S.

When you retire in 1933, you retire to the Florida Gulf Coast where your new normal is golfing, beach walking, and socializing with your retired neighbors.

You move back to Ohio in 2010 and your new normal is living the Western Reserve Masonic Community south of Medina. When your husband dies in 2015, you look forward to your sons or grandchildren taking you to the Waffle House or to Bob Evans for a waffle. During Holy Week, your family gathers for your funeral a week before your 105th birthday.

Rich Selong, your first born, shares memories and is thankful for Easter morning and eternal life, his mother's new normal.

Think about it. If you were to receive some terrible news tomorrow — a bad medical diagnosis, the death of a loved one, or the loss of a job — would you be inclined to hit the panic button? Or would you hit the snooze button instead, pulling the covers over your head, going into a kind of denial, hoping the problem will just go away?

There's an alternative. We can choose to press another button, located right between panic and snooze. We can decide, in faith, to accept the new normal. Sure, there may be grief for the old normal that is no more, but we know those days are not coming back. The hard truth is, the Lord has picked us up and dropped us right into the middle of a new normal. So, what is there to do but unpack, arrange our clothes in the dresser drawer and make ourselves as comfortable as we can?

There's a passage in the Bible that talks about the new normal, although it doesn't use that phrase. In 2 Corinthians 4:8-11, the apostle Paul has this to say:

“We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed, always carrying around in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For we who are living are always being handed over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our mortal flesh.”

Paul doesn't mince words here. He's not like those prosperity preachers you see on TV, who promise that if you just give your heart to Jesus, every good thing will come drifting down

to you like manna from heaven; that you'll never have any pain, difficulty or heartache, ever again.

No, Paul is brutally realistic. Just look at the words he uses: “afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down.” No hint of a prosperity gospel here, just a frank acknowledgment that life — for Christians as for any other person — is hard, and sometimes very hard.

But there's some good news. Such affliction is not forever. Eventually, we can grow to accept the new normal. We can learn, in time, how to push that button between panic and snooze. We can claim the difficult experience as our own. And we can come to realize that, while life may knock us down sometimes, it can never *keep* us down — not if we approach such obstacles with Christ by our side.

Paul goes on to speak of facing the ultimate challenge: the death that will one day come to us all. We are “always carrying around in the body the death of Jesus.” To Paul, even facing the prospect of death is a new normal. Beyond it, by the grace of Jesus Christ, is the promise of resurrection. He's bold to claim, “that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.” We may be struck down, he admits. But we're not destroyed.

Kate Bowler, a professor at Duke Divinity School, has become an inspiration to many, not so much for what she's taught and written as an academic — which is impressive — but for her personal story as a survivor of colon cancer. Kate — at the time a young mother — was diagnosed at age 35 and given just a few months to live.

It turned out she did a lot better than expected and is still very much with us, but the experience changed her life. Ever since then, in addition to her teaching and research, she has spoken and written about her own experience claiming and owning the new normal.

In an e-mailed devotional from 2021, Kate shares something Anthony of the Desert, a monk from Egypt and the most famous of all early monastics, once said. Kate was writing in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic — which suddenly established a new normal for all of us to get used to. Someone once asked Brother Anthony what we ought to do to please God.

The ancient monk replied with a very simple piece of advice: “Wherever you go, keep God in mind. Whatever you do, follow the example of Holy Scripture. Wherever you are, stay there and do not move away in a hurry.”

Kate comments:

“What I hear in those instructions is to try to eliminate double mindedness. BE WHERE YOU ARE. I know that’s not a favorite choice right now that we are stuck, but also a great permission slip. You don’t have to be extra, extra holy. You simply have to be where you are, and keep God in mind.”

Be where you are. And keep God in mind. It’s hard to think of a better motto for loving the new normal than that.

There are many stories about Christians who find, amidst the new normal, new strength for living. One is a now-retired Episcopal priest from Massachusetts named Paul Bresnahan. Late in life, he found himself undergoing radiation treatments for prostate cancer. Sitting in the waiting room one day, Paul heard the technician call out his name. He quipped — for everyone in the glum assembly to hear — “My turn to shine!” The room erupted in laughter.

“Who *is* that man?” somebody asked.

“He’s my parish priest,” said a friend who’d been sitting there with him.

Here’s what Father Paul wrote, later on, about the experience:

“Inside the treatment facility, as I lay on the table with a giant metal fork rotating around me and beaming its rays within my body, I saw the hand of God and sensed a healing touch within me. I saw no vision other than the hand of science and medicine ministering to me out of the gifts God so generously bestows upon the caregiving community in my home city. The beaming rays of radiation give me the gift of healing and of life, and I am brim full of gratitude.”

Brim full of gratitude. *In the radiation suite?* How is that possible?

With that sort of faith, the apostle Paul articulates it is indeed possible: “Afflicted but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair.” It’s the gift of God to all who resolve to be where they are and keep God in mind.

None of us get very far as survivors of one affliction or another by pretending that bad things don’t happen to good people. The reality is that sometimes they do in this fallen world we all live in. Nor can we claim God protects Christians from pain and struggle — just ask Paul, with all his talk of affliction and perplexity. But one thing most any Christian survivor of hard times learns from hard experiences is that, along with affliction, the Lord gives us what we need to get through difficult times. All of it is built on awareness and acceptance in faith of the new normal.

Yes, there are losses in life. Accepting the new normal means bidding farewell to the old, knowing it may never return. Edith Selong learned to do that, over and over during her 105 years. Paul Bresnahan learned it lying on a radiation table. Kate Bowler learned it as she resolved simply to be where she was. Countless survivors of fires, floods and hurricanes have

had to say farewell to their old homes, but learned to look forward rather than back, knowing the life they are living is still a good life.

We Christians are a resurrection people. We know that out of death comes new life. Out of a shattered, old normal comes a new normal. There's still joy to be found, hope to be cherished, and a resurrection faith that sustains and strengthens.

Even if the worst should come, God creates for us a new normal, a place that — in often unexpected ways — offers blessedness and joy!

May the peace of God . . .

#763 – My Life Flows On in Endless Song