

## Old Hippies

Joshua 5:9-12; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-2, 11-32

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March 27, 2022; Fourth Sunday in Lent

In our Old Testament Lesson, this morning, it's a wonderful day for the Israelites. The horrors of their slavery in Egypt are behind them. Their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness are over. They are in the Promised land, where they are supposed to be.

And nothing says 'permanence' like eating the food of this new land. It's clear God is with us. No more manna. No more quail. From now on it's real, grown-in-the-ground, made-it-ourselves, food.

But that means no more food falling out of the sky. Now we have to dig the ground, plant the crops, harvest. Grapes have to be stomped, olives have to be pressed, grain has to be winnowed and ground into flour and baked into bread.

Do you suppose anyone said, "Wait a minute. This is a lot of work. I'm not sure I like this new land. I'm not sure I want this new future. The past was normal. This is weird. I think I prefer the wilderness. I think I prefer going back to the past."

Sound familiar? Has that ever happened to you? You move into a new stage of life; you know it's the right thing to do and you know God is with you. But man, this is hard. I prefer the past! Have you ever felt that way?

My first duty station in the Army was Fort Dix, New Jersey. And let me tell you, I had culture shock. Serious culture shock. I had travelled. I'd lived in different places. I knew about adapting to new cultures. Plus, I was excited about the Army. I was excited about this new part of my life. I couldn't wait for it to happen.

But somehow, between adjusting to the Army and adjusting to New Jersey, I went into a serious funk. I mean, I was down – emotionally, spiritually, every which way. Life was hard and I wanted out. I wanted to go back to the past, where life was normal and I knew what to do.

Do you know that feeling? New job? New baby? First year of being married? It's like, I know this is the right thing to do but I am really struggling here. Can I go back to what I know, to what's normal?

I think that's how many of us feel when we start seriously walking with Jesus, when we begin fully embracing the cross. We know we should see people differently, not as sinful human beings but as loved and forgiven children of God. We know we are to be ambassadors of this good news by what we say and how we live. But it's a big change, and it's hard.

I get that. I do. I understand when we choose not to. I understand about backing away from Jesus, backing away from the cross, going back to the way things used to be.

This is the crisis of the cross and we all have to face it. Will we embrace the cross and see each other as new creations, reconciled to God, or will we keep on as we were, seeing others from a human point of view, holding their sins against them? Are we going to embrace the life of the cross, or are we going to push it away and go back to what was 'normal'?

This is the crisis the Prodigal Son is facing. Is he going to follow his dad, or is he going to follow his instincts? Is he going to see his brother in a new way, or is he going to stick to the past?

Many of you, I'm sure, know the story well. A man has two sons. The younger son can't wait to inherit and so he asks his father for his share of the inheritance. This would have been extremely rude. It's like saying, "I can't wait for you to die. Give me my money now."

The father, for whatever reason, divides the inheritance and gives the younger brother his share. The younger brother then goes away and squanders his money in dissolute living.

But then, when the younger son hits rock bottom, he changes. He realizes what he's done. He's no longer the arrogant kid in a hurry. He's a grown man who knows he's made a serious mistake. The rude, headstrong, irrational person is gone. He has become a new person. He is a new creation. And it is that new person, that new creation, who goes home to his father.

But the older son won't hear it. In fact, the older son won't hear anything. He won't even go in and talk to his brother.

Understand, the older brother is in the right. He's the Good Son. He's the one who did what he was supposed to do.

But now he has to decide. Is he going to cling to his anger and resentment? Or is he going to see his brother as the Father does? A new man, forgiven. Is he going to see him as Paul tells us we are to see others? Or is he going to reject the life of the cross? Is he going to move into the future, or is he going to stay in the past?

Sometimes, we struggle with it. We all do. Do we stay outside with the older brother or go inside and enjoy the party? Do we stay in the Promised Land or go back to the Wilderness? Do we stay with the old or become new? We as churches do it. We as individuals do it. Do we hang on to the past or do we grab on to the new?

I was thinking about this the other day and an old song came into my head. I thought it was by Jimmy Buffet, but Jimmy Buffet must have covered it. I did a little digging and learned that the song was originally by The Bellamy Brothers. Does that ring a bell with you? Anyone know them?

The Bellamy Brothers were a country-pop duo most famous in the 70s and 80s. If I sang some of their songs for you, you would probably know them. Would you like me to? Sorry. I'm not.

One of their hits was a song called "Old Hippie". They've remade it a few times over the decades, but I prefer the original from 1985. It's about a man who's at a crossroads in his life. He's getting too old for the hippie lifestyle, but can he let it go? Can he embrace his new circumstances and live well in them? He knows the hippie lifestyle, he's comfortable there, it's normal for him. The future is unknown, scary. What should he do?

Part of the refrain goes, "He's an old hippie and he don't know what to do. Should he hang on to the old or should he grab on to the new?" Should he hang on to the old or should he grab on to the new? Should he hang on to the old, should he do what he knows, what's normal for him, should he look at people the way he always has and think about them the way he always has, or should he let that go and grab on to the new?

This is the moment we all come to. This is the crisis of the cross. What will we do? Will we hang on to the old or grab on to the new?

As individuals will we cling to the old hurts and the old grievances? Will we stay outside with the older brother, refusing to see the new person our heavenly Father has forgiven and freed? Or will we embrace the cross and see each other, no longer from a human point of view but through the eyes of Jesus? Will we see the new creation God wants us all to be?

As a church will we stay in the wilderness where it's comfortable, where we know what to do, where we know how to do the things we've always done, and we know what normal means? Or are we going to step out in faith, trusting God is with us, and learn to thrive in ministry in the post-covid world?

I don't know what to say. I don't know what to tell you. But I do know this: normal's never coming back. Normal is never coming back. Normal, is never, coming back. What was normal before is never coming back.

But Jesus is. Thanks be to God. Amen.