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The Danger of Normalcy
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Thank you for the benefit of having a week of vacation. That seems such a normal routine, yet even a hundred years ago many of our vocations did not have vacations. My bride and I used this to spend some time together and to get to know our new State better. Having previously seen the Grand Canyon and Sedona, we visited Patagonia, Mt. Lemon, Winslow, the Petrified Forest, Painted Desert, Meteor Crater, Pueblos and Petroglyphs. For the last 45 years when on vacation, I sat on a beach or lakefront, reading a stack of Business Journals and Harvard Business Reviews, because part of a vacation is doing what you do not ordinarily have opportunity to consider. So living on the endless beach of Arizona, I sat in the backyard and reread.

A good friend had told me that "After the Election everything will return to normal. After the Election COVID will disappear. After the Election the Economy will resolve itself." There seems to be an assumption, that if not in Crisis, everything is resolved as Normal. What I began to get in touch with, is the vital importance of contrast and diversity. We crave the appearance of "homeostasis", confidence everything is resolved which will make people happy; when as Christians, as Americans, as Human Creatures, Life has never been resolved. The world we were gifted on the 7th Day was Very Good but not finished.

We have just completed our Presidential Election. While many of us thank God that the election, commercials, phone calls and debates are ended; we are one of the only Nations in history which has done this, which trusts its citizens to listen and to choose between alternatives. The difficulty is that our system is not designed to resolve differences, we do not form a new government out of the best of both, instead the differences are contrasted empowering us to choose.

We want to believe in homeostasis, that everyone is happy together, but we cannot whitewash over the differences, or claim our problems are resolved by dominance. Within the church, Stephen Ministry and Congregational Care believe that the purpose of the church is to care for people's soul; while Finance/ Budget/Generosity have a bottom-line that this be a corporation with a balanced budget; the Choirs are frustrated that they have been unable to sing in harmony for 8 months; Missions Committee always recognizes the injustices in the world and that we can do more.

As a Pastor, I have officiated at 20 to 30 weddings each year for 36 years. While some churches only permit their priests to perform weddings for their members or in their Sanctuaries, I have followed three rules: Do the Bride and Groom want to be married before God? Do the Bride and Groom and I believe they will do whatever it

takes to be married to one another all of their lives? Will they participate in pre-marital counseling to plan their wedding and discuss their marital relationship? While there have been weddings with their children involved; there have been weddings with their dogs; there have been weddings on boats and in gardens and in the woods; there have been less than ten out of nearly a thousand weddings that have not worked out; there have been those who chose to not marry; there have been a few, I decided I could not marry; there was one where the Best-man objected to the two being married! But in all those different weddings, over all those years, when the Bride and Groom were asked "Do you choose to marry this person?" not a single one, standing before their family and friends and God ever said "NO."

In much the same way, the first time Joshua asks the people, he knows their answer. Israel left slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt, which was all they could remember; to follow Moses, Aaron and Joshua through the wilderness for 40 years; then after Moses and Aaron died to continue to follow Joshua for another 40 years as they settled in the promised land. Now, with Joshua being 110 years of age, Joshua brings the people back to Shechem, that mountain where their ancestors made a Covenant with God. Joshua's point, like being asked during your wedding if you want to be married, is that this is not about knowing the expected answer, is making a covenant with God.

After all these years of wandering and conflict, Israel had taken possession of the land // had grown tired. Life was unfolding in some semblance of normalcy. However, as much as normal life meant a world without crises, plagues and fear, Joshua knew there are dangers in normalcy. Normalcy could cause people to become indifferent. Normal life could delude people into believing that it wasn't God who had been providing for them all along—rather, it was all their own doing, their right or their possession. The Israelites could water down their commitment to the one God by worshipping all the idols associated with the Canaanite world around them. Their loyalties could easily be divided among the various false gods. Israel would lose their identity and unity as God's Chosen People if they took life as normal. To choose God is to choose empathy for others, believing not only in today but in the future with God and with our neighbors. To choose the values and commitments of the prevailing culture is to choose competition at all costs.

One of those books on Systemic Thinking described a couple who married... She was a Financial Planner who guarded every penny; while he was an Investment Broker who believed you should enjoy life. They chose to not compromise, to not try to become something they were not. Instead, there had been times when they did without because she was protecting their assets; and there had been times when they went on travel adventures he wanted them to share. But the two lived every moment as a gift from God to be shared together.

Jesus' parable of the Wise and Foolish has been interpreted many different ways over time. But today, what I hear in this parable is how many of us live as if coping with today were all that there is; instead of believing that there could be so much more than normal routine. Trusting that Christ will come, we will be prepared for a great wedding celebration, but we need to believe there is something more than normal life.

Our church has been supportive of Missionaries in South Sudan. Several years ago I had performed a wedding for a Sudanese Couple in the church. We were delighted to have just installed an Air Conditioning system in the Sanctuary, as the wedding was in August. Different from American Weddings, in a Sudanese Wedding the focus is not upon what the Bride is wearing, but as here in Matthew upon the Bridegroom! The focus is not on having the wedding ceremony at 3pm, but on negotiation of the dowry. For 12 hours they negotiated and argued worth and value of her education, of his career. But exactly at 3pm both families sang a hymn, and I imagined the wedding would take place on schedule, as we had 300 South Sudanese and 300 Americans waiting in the Sanctuary. But the Groom suddenly drove away! I asked why, and was told "It would have been presumptuous for the Bride to be present while we negotiated, so now the Groom has to drive an hour to pick her up and an hour back, before the wedding could begin! Two hours later, there were cheers and shouts as the Bridegroom arrived!

Anxious for the election to be resolved, anxious for the scientists to find a cure for the pandemic, anxious about our economy and the world's problems, we have lived isolated lives hoping only for a return to normalcy. I invite you to choose for yourselves, but I and my household are committed to faith in the God of the covenant, who has always cared for us, and will guide us into a new and different future.