

A New Normal, a sermon in response to 1 Samuel 8:4-20 and Mark 3:20-35 by Scot McCachren at the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton, June 20, 2018. (*Originally formatted to assist oral presentation, including irregular punctuation.*)

Youth and Children's Sunday is one of my favorite weeks of the year – not just having all of you at church, but also having you participate in the service as ushers, singers, – and, of course, with the wonderful scripture readings provided this morning by Brighton and Luke. It's a time when, as a church, we can say how much all of you children and youth mean to us – so, I encourage everyone to do just that after our service – tell the kids how you feel about them. +++ Today marks the end of our 2017-18 year of Sunday School and Youth Group. It's been a great year. As I think back over the year with the youth, particularly, the thing I remember the most are just *conversations* we'd have together at our Sunday night meetings – maybe during dinner, or when we would circle up later – when we talk about all the stuff you are involved with in your life – and some of the things you have to deal with. +++ One thing that often comes up in one form or another is peer pressure... It's the pressure to act a certain way... – maybe dress a certain way... – or talk a certain way... – to fit in with the other kids. +++ Oh, and, by the way, you should know that it's not just you kids. *Adults* deal with Peer Pressure too – don't we?? +++ So everything we are going to talk about has to do with ALL of us – youth and adults alike. +++ Peer pressure is not always *intentional*, is it? Sometimes you barely know it's happening – and that's when it's the hardest to deal with. When we think about peer pressure, we usually picture people *going out of their way* to talk you into doing something you wouldn't do on your own... Right? Like their *goal* is to steer you off course. +++ And, I guess, *sometimes* that *is* what happens... But it's usually not like that. More often, I think, you just see everyone else doing something – enough people doing it, in fact, that it starts to seem normal, like you have to do it, too, just to be NORMAL – just to fit in... “I gotta have that new smart phone!”... “I gotta go to that party – or be part of that group!”... “I gotta skip school just to go hang out somewhere”... +++ +++ ... “I gotta try that drug.”... +++ Even if someone tries to explain the consequences, sometimes you feel like You've just gotta do it.+++

And it's *always* been this way – hasn't it? ... Everyone in this church has felt it. When I was a teenager, it was most of those same things I just listed – plus... the shoes had to be *Canvas Converse Coaches*... you had to wear jeans every day, and the jeans had to be *Levi's*... and *cigarettes* were very popular – much more popular than they are now, thank the Lord. (But, of course, *now* there's vaping.) +++ These are the things people do just because you think it makes you NORMAL. +++ +++ Gotta be “Normal”... *Always*, Gotta be Normal... And what does “normal” even mean? There's no moral quality to it – it has nothing to do with knowing right from wrong. It just means “being like everybody else.” And who makes these decisions, anyway, about what's normal and what's not. Nobody, really – it just evolves. +++ It's just a social construction... +++ Gotta be “Normal”. +++ +++ But, really, every single one of us – we actually have our OWN normal, don't we?? – If we'd just accept ourselves like we are - We ARE good enough – exactly how God made us.:: – We know the difference in right and wrong – We have our own talents – our own hopes – and our own dreams. +++ Why does it take us so long to learn that?? +++ You've got a good thing going if you'd just stick to what makes you, you. +++ But, then, you see everyone *else* is doing something... – and it seems to be working for them... – It's easy to stop thinking for yourself... Maybe *everybody else* is “Normal” but you – ... and then you start thinking that you need to change – All because you're not just exactly like everyone else – even though you've actually been doing OK – as long as you stick to what YOU know is right. +++ +++ But... you know... Gotta be Normal.

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In our Old Testament reading today, this is exactly what's happening to the people of Israel. +++ Remember last week we talked about the childhood call of Samuel, when God whispered to him in the night? Well, now Samuel has grown old and he has been listening to the Lord ever since that night. +++ Here's what's happening::... Ever since they left Egypt, God has always led Israel directly, first through Moses, then Joshua, then through the Judges. Now, Samuel has taken over that role – leading Israel to follow the commands of God. +++ And it has always worked well for them – *as long as they obey God*. Israel has had incredible

success, taking the Promised Land by conquering armies *much* greater than their own, *with the power of the Lord leading the way*. Their communities thrive, their crops grow, their water is pure – *as long as they do what they know is right by obeying God*. **No** other nation was like Israel – they had a good thing going, and if they’d just stick with what made them great, they’d be fine:: (That is – if they keep relying on God instead of on themselves.) +++ But that isn’t good enough for Israel... All the **cool countries** have a king – everybody but them – the Ammonites and Moabites – they have kings. Even the Philistines, their greatest enemy at the time: *they* have a king. +++ “*I gotta* have a king. *Everybody else* has one.” Israel wants to be “**Normal**”, **instead of being true to who they are**. +++ Samuel tries to explain the consequences:: A king will take your *sons* to become his soldiers, his workers, and his farmers... A king will take your *daughters* to be perfumers and cooks – and he will take your best *lands* and your *livestock* for himself. +++ But they weren’t even listening to Samuel – they were too busy fantasizing about a **king** who would lead them into glorious battle instead of God Almighty – a **king** that would impress the other nations. +++ “*I gotta* have a **king**.” +++ +++ But becoming “normal” by human standards – going from one extreme to the other – meant turning their back on God – the one who made them powerful in the first place. It meant forgetting who they really were and what made them special. +++ And so, shortly after this passage, Saul becomes the first king of Israel – and he has some military successes at first – but ultimately he is a moral failure – he cares more about preserving his own power than serving God. +++ +++ You have to be careful about what you are giving up when you change to be like everyone else – when you set aside your values – the things that make you special – to be something you were never meant to be.

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“Gotta be **Normal**...” +++ That’s what everyone is trying to tell Jesus in today’s Gospel reading. It’s not just the scribes, who think he is possessed by a demon... **Jesus’ own family and friends** – *even they* think he is out of his mind because he is teaching so intensely – drawing people to himself – not taking time to rest or even eat. They try to make him calm down – stop making a spectacle of himself – stop embarrassing *them*... +++ Be more like everybody else, Jesus... **Be Normal**... +++ +++ But – one thing we’ve learned about Jesus is – you could never tell him how he should act, or what he should say – whether you were his best friend – his worst enemy – or even his own mother. Jesus would never conform to be who YOU think he should be. +++ **Jesus didn’t care about being Normal**. +++ “**Normal**” just gets in the way... +++

Let’s look what’s happening in the verses surrounding today’s reading to get a better idea of what’s going on. It’s all about discipleship – **what it means – what it takes** – to truly be a follower of Christ. Jesus has just appointed the Twelve Apostles and it’s time for them to start learning from their master. +++ And, he is *about* to tell us the Parable of the Sower – planting our seeds into good soil where they can grow, instead of shallow ground... He is *about* to tell us to let our light shine for the world and not be covered... He is *about* to tell us about the tiny mustard seed that grows to be the greatest of all shrubs. +++ Growing – shining – **holding nothing back** – always being all we can be for the world... and for God. **That’s** what it means to follow Jesus. +++ And here – despite everyone trying to make Jesus calm down and act NORMAL – he gives a real live training session on what discipleship is all about – **he demonstrates... himself... what he expects us all to do::...** +++ **Put everything else aside and focus on the will of God**. +++ **PERIOD** +++ **That means challenge any attacks on the Lord** – as the scribes do, saying that Jesus is filled with a demon:: Christ is filled with the Spirit of God – and to call the Holy Spirit a demon is blasphemy. +++ **It means not being distracted**, even by those closest to you – as Jesus demonstrates here when his mother and brothers are worried sick about him – so they come to pull him out of a crowd that surrounds him – and Jesus says he is going nowhere because the crowd *itself* is his **real** family. +++

Yeah – pretty outrageous stuff. +++ Jesus is definitely not going to win any popularity contests based on today’s passage – **and he couldn’t care less!!** +++ There is so much happening in these few verses – +++ Jesus is assertive – +++ and wise – +++ and powerful. +++ +++ Jesus Christ is so **far beyond** our simplistic ideas of being Normal – he sets a new standard. Christ... is... the **NEW NORMAL**. +++ Zeroed in on serving God +++ Holding nothing back +++ Being all he can be, every moment. +++ +++

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THIS is what we are being called to, as disciples of Jesus. To be part of Christ’s New Normal. +++ THE GOOD NEWS is – that each one of us already has the ability to do it. God gave you the ability to **judge** right from wrong – to **choose** your own course of action – to **set** your own priorities. +++ God gave YOU the **strength** to **know** when you are on the right path +++ and to reject the judgment of others – the peer pressure – that tells us we aren’t good enough unless we fall in line with everyone else – the voices that say we have to be “Normal”. +++ +++ So, when you start feeling pressure to act a certain way – whether it’s about things that seem small – like honesty, being kind to animals, or sharing – +++ or big things, like standing up for people who are being bullied, or making life-changing choices about drugs and alcohol... +++ when you start feeling pressure to do things just because it’s what everyone else is doing – because it’s “Normal” +++ remember +++ that **YOU** aren’t living for the Normal – +++ **YOU** are living for ... A **New** Normal – +++ **THE** ... New ...Normal – of Jesus Christ.

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.