

The Myths and Gifts of Normalcy



Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

August 27, 2023

(Sermon given in Hampton Falls, New Hampshire)

I love being here to preach each August. It is beautiful inside, with its trompe l'oeil paintings and reed organ. It is beautiful outside, with the waving meadows, farmland, and trees. We have gathered here on cloudy days, on rainy days, and on bright sunny mornings like today.

It is a tradition, or one might say, an old-fashioned way that this congregation and my congregation in Newburyport have joined for decades. The ministers of the First Religious Society come here rain or shine, in all ages and stages of their ministries.

Preaching here is also time-consuming, and it is kind. I love preparing and delivering these sermons because they can be so normal.

Average. One could even say, though I wouldn't, that they are unnecessary sermons. These late August sermons don't need to communicate a vital message of where the congregation is in its journey, nor make an appeal for money, nor solve the justice issue of the day. They can just be normal and, I hope, kind. They can meander, wander, wonder, and pause to consider daily living. They are exquisite in this normalcy.

When did our pursuit of greatness become more important than knowing our exquisiteness?

Greatness is overrated in our society, at least in the middle and upper middle class, largely white neighborhoods, along the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. Children are taught to pursue greatness, to be the best at whatever they try. This relentless pursuit has turned being average into being a failure. How can everyone be great? What is average then?

The truth is that we are not necessarily great, certainly not in everything we do, nor throughout our lives. Most of us are more or less average. And at the same time, our mere existence is exquisite.

The myth of greatness applies equally to adults as to children, including adults in the last decades of their lives. All too many of these worry that they didn't do it right as they near the ends of

their lives. They made mistakes or mis-prioritized. "What is my legacy?" people ask. It's a fallacy that legacy is only for the great and the high achievers. Your life is your legacy. Your ordinary, exquisite self is your legacy. That is more often true for those who are great and achieved as well.

We don't miss greatness when people die. We miss their ordinariness. We miss their lumpy mashed potatoes, their tendencies to always know the answers. We miss their vulnerabilities, their smiles with wrinkles on their beloved faces.

On reading the title of this sermon, FRS member Wendy Ford sent me an email sharing how important the concept of normalcy is to her and her adult children.

With her permission, I share her words:

"The very word (normalcy) has held special meaning for me ever since my fabulous husband, who had to go all too soon, said—just after we received the devastating diagnosis—that it was all that he wanted (normalcy). I suppose I am always trying to keep his spirit alive—or at least available. He was extraordinary, and his wish for Normalcy truly did set the children and me down such a healthy path.

"You probably have your sermon for this Sunday all set, but I couldn't help noticing the subject. I believe that my book, *Normalcy*, is still on the FRS site, and I just wanted you to know that you are welcome to any part of it that you might find helpful."

Thank you, Wendy.

When my own father died a few months ago, I wanted two things of his: anything that had his handwriting on it and one of his flannel shirts. I didn't care about his big accomplishments, diplomas from prestigious schools, or work awards. I wanted to feel him, see his message, and remember his everyday, normal self.

In addition to blinding us to the exquisiteness of life, the pursuit of greatness feeds the myth that we are alone and somehow flawed, while

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everyone else has it all together. I can assure you this is not true, nor should it be.

I learned a long time ago that there is nothing any of us experience, feel, question, or believe that others don't also experience, feel, question, and believe. We just must be brave to talk about it appropriately and have close community and friends who take their experiences seriously too. Think about the myths of perpetual good health or about a particular sized or abled body if you eat the right thing. It is human to be imperfect, flawed, average, and aging. It is human to be normal. It is human to be exquisite at the same time, in all our normalcy. These are liberating truths.

Here, on this exquisite Sunday, we get to be normal together. We get to rejoice in what Richard Rhor calls the good, the beautiful, and the true.

Let's celebrate the ordinary: flannel shirts, jean jackets, dogs, and fireflies.

Let's celebrate children's sticky hands that leave a mess on the windowpanes and kitchen cupboards.

Let's celebrate our changing body, its achy back, making our shoes hard to reach and tie.

Let's celebrate what we can do and the exquisite world of which we are part, its beauty, fragility, and the care we must give it.

I believe life created every part of creation, including you, to be exquisite just as you are. I don't believe life cares about greatness. I do believe it celebrates our gifts and our efforts.

May we all remember the gifts of normalcy. May we make room to do things that are time-consuming, even old-fashioned, that are unnecessary, and that are, most defiantly, kind.

Amen.