Sept. 23, 2018 (Sr. Michelle Collins)

Mark 9:30-37

1 Sam 3:1-10

Ps. 116:1-7, 12-19

2 Tim 2

If you think back to when you were a child or a young adult, how many times did someone ask you what you wanted to be when you grow up? This is a question I think we begin asking kids in preschool during the community helpers unit, when we bring in a firefighter, a police officer, a nurse or doctor, and someone else who wears a suit. We talk about these jobs, do learning activities around them, and ask kids to fill out a questionnaire about what they want to be when they grow up. And in preschool the answers are often things like “I want to be an astronaut,” or “I want to be a princess and a teacher,” or “I want to be a pilot.” What was it like for you? Who did those questions come from? How did you answer them at different times in your life?

And when you were asked those questions, did you ever get the sense that there was a right and wrong answer? Hopefully your specific situation was different, and you were told you could be who or what ever you wanted to be. But would you agree that generally, as a stereotypical response, we have a sense that some aspirations are more valuable than others? Some occupations are more valuable than others? Maybe even some people are more valuable than others? And more valuable based on what? Things like job security, financial sustainability, our perception of relational stability…stuff like that.

Or think about it like this…when you look back on your life, what are the things that you feel you are most ‘proud of’ when it comes to achievements and accomplishments? What are the things that you think give YOU value? Hopefully they have to do with relationships. But do they also have to do with these external signs of success—like money, promotions, stuff like that? Most of us probably don’t first look at the challenges and struggles in our lives as things that would be added to the ‘accomplishments’ column of our lives, right? Most of us have probably struggled to come to a place of accepting that our value has really nothing to do with our accomplishments.

Our Gospel text today directly challenges this tendency to label and define ‘greatness’ and ‘success’ the way many of us probably were influenced to do it. The passage begins with Jesus spending some time talking with his disciples about his inevitable death. It continues with the disciples arguing about who is the greatest, and then Jesus pulling a child into the conversation as the model and example of greatness. And it ends by saying that greatness has to do with being a servant and being last more than it has to do with being first.

Think about it like this. When we talk to children, young people, or really anyone about what they want to do with their life, do we encourage character and the kind of person someone is rather than the kind of job someone has? Do we support dreams that involve giving it all away and pursuing something that has no guarantee of success? The text doesn’t tell us what they were discussing, but only that they were arguing about who was the greatest.

Hopefully we do. Hopefully in the church we see greatness slightly different than the world around us. Hopefully as a community that follows Jesus, we understand that the call to love God and love neighbor often does not result in 6-digit salaries, mansions, and immortality. Hopefully we don’t spend too much time arguing with each other about who is the greatest. Hopefully, we flip the world’s stereotypes over and we say, ‘yes…children and those who are vulnerable ARE the ones we welcome into the center of our community. Yes…we acknowledge the pain and darkness of death, but we also claim the power of resurrection beyond death. Yes…we celebrate the deep sense of life and joy that comes from serving others.’

Today we are gathered specifically to celebrate the 30th anniversary of ordination for Pastor Mattei. I would imagine that if he were talking about his journey through life, and about his call to be a pastor, he would probably not talk about the financial success, the promotions, and the potential for power and influence as the things that drew him to this occupation, or what makes this job great. Based on the texts that were chosen for today, I would imagine that instead Pr. Mattei would speak to a deep sense of calling that is hard to explain…much like the voice Samuel heard that night. This sense of calling was compelling, and grounded in the example of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In response to a deep conviction about God and God’s love for humanity and creation, Pr. Mattei has faithfully served others through his pastoral ministry for the last 30 years. This calling has taken him out of his home country of Italy, through several states throughout the U.S., and landed him here in Florida. But it wasn’t driven by a promise of success, power or prestige…it was driven by the transformational story of a baby born in a manger, who was a wandering teacher and preacher, who gave his life for the sake of others, and who brought to the world a physical example of God’s heart for restoration and reconciliation. It was driven by daily hearing that voice of God and responding, “Here I am, lord. Speak, for your servant is listening.”

But more than that, I would imagine that when Pr. Mattei reflects on these last 30 years of ministry, the things that bring the most joy and fulfillment are not the money, or the prestige, or the popularity. Instead, the joy and fulfillment of following Jesus comes in the relationships with people, in those conversations that go deep into the questions and mysteries of life, in those opportunities to gather community around the Communion Table and proclaim a message of redemption and forgiveness, in those invitations to pour water over a child or adult’s head and declare the presence of the Holy Spirit in that person’s life. The joy and fulfillment of following Jesus comes from listening to the voice of God and being available for what God has to say.

And this is not just for pastors. All of us, who are called by the Holy Spirit and gathered around this story of love and grace for all people, are invited to experience this kind of greatness. In our baptism we are gifted with the Holy Spirit, who continually forms us and calls us into the world as we grow in love for God and love for neighbor. As we listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit, our response to ‘what do you want to do with your life’ shifts. As we hear the voice and respond with, “Here I am, Lord, speak, for your servant is listening,” we notice that instead of wanting to make money, we want to make memories. We notice than rather than valuing power, we value people. We notice that instead of aspiring for success, we seek servant-hearted compassion. Because following Jesus turns greatness upside down.

If the world’s definition of greatness has torn you down and caused you to feel unworthy or inferior, I hope you will see yourself in this story of Jesus welcoming a child, and know that you belong. You, as a beloved child of God, are great. You, as a beloved child of God, are welcome. You, as a beloved child of God, have something to share with and teach those around you. I hope you will see yourself in he story of Samuel and listen again for the voice of God—who *is* calling you.

If you, like me, are still trying to figure out what you want to be when you grow up, I hope you will hear the message of the gospel that turns greatness upside down and invites an entirely different perspective on success and achievement. Take the words from 2nd Timothy to heart and “be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” That’s where greatness starts—in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

And I hope that we as a community of faith can continue to model to the world that Jesus turns greatness upside down. As a community, I hope we stay committed to values and practices that may not ever result in extravagance, but always prioritize people, service, compassion and love. Because that’s the example Jesus set out for us. And that’s the witness of Pr. Mattei and so many other pastors and leaders who have guided us through our lives.

Jesus turns greatness upside down. He gives us the ultimate example of greatness in his sacrificial life and death. And he calls us as his disciples—who sometimes have questions we’re too afraid to ask and often get in arguments about the stuff that ultimately doesn’t matter—to expand our vision, to welcome those who society has labeled as less than valuable, to receive the gifts of water, wine and bread, and to follow him.

Pr. Mattei, thank you for your witness to the greatness that Jesus describes and models with his life. People of God gathered as Nativity Lutheran Church, thank you for your faithfulness in lifting up the greatness that is in service, compassion and love. As we continue to be who God wants us to be, and as we invite others to imagine what they want to be, may we continue to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. May we daily hear the voice of God and respond with, “Here I am Lord. Here we are Lord. Speak, for your servants are listening.”