

## Role Reversal

<sup>NRS</sup> **1 Samuel 3:1** Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli.

The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

<sup>2</sup> At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; <sup>3</sup> the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. <sup>4</sup> Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" <sup>5</sup> and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. <sup>6</sup> The LORD called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." <sup>7</sup> Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. <sup>8</sup> The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. <sup>9</sup> Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. <sup>10</sup> Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

<sup>11</sup> Then the LORD said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. <sup>12</sup> On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. <sup>13</sup> For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. <sup>14</sup> Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever."

<sup>15</sup> Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. <sup>16</sup> But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." <sup>17</sup> Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." <sup>18</sup> So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him."

I'm embarrassed to say that I didn't like Mr. Rogers much when I was a kid. He always came on after Sesame Street, and let's face it- that's a hard act to follow. Sesame Street had it all- great songs, cartoons, and those fuzzy monster puppets. So then, after the energy of Sesame, after hearing that the show was brought to us by the generous letter 'p' and the magnanimous number '4', then Mr. Roger's Neighborhood came on. And I

think it was hard for me to switch gears. Mr. Rogers was always so much quieter, so much slower. And then there the clothes- it always drove me nuts that he never came in and just got started. No, he'd come through the door and he would change his shoes and put on his trademark sweater. I always wondered, "Couldn't he change his clothes BEFORE the show started?" Of course today I realize he was trying to establish regular patterns and normal children probably find that comforting, but to me it was just frustrating.

So, I never liked Mr. Rogers as a kid- it wasn't until I grew up and learned more about him that my opinion of him changed.

He was a Presbyterian minister, of course- a lot people know that. What fewer people know, though, is how much of a minister he really was- even though he never pastored a church. Exactly 10 years ago a journalist named Tom Junod profiled Mr. Rogers for a story in Esquire magazine. As part of the story he traveled with Mr. Rogers to California to visit a 14 year old boy who suffered from a severe form of cerebral palsy.

The boy, and Junod never shared his name to protect his identity, the boy didn't just suffer from cerebral palsy, but as a child he was also terribly abused. And now, as a teenager, nearly every day the boy became so angry with himself he would hit himself, hard, with his own fists, and nearly every day he would tell his mother he wanted to die, that he was sure God didn't like what was inside of him anymore than he did.

Now, the only thing that would calm him down, the only thing he seemed to like to do at all was watching Mr. Rogers. Even at 14 he watched Mr. Rogers every single day- it was the only peaceful time of his day, his mom said. She told Junod she had come to believe that Mr. Rogers was the only thing keeping her son alive.

Well she had this crazy dream of Mr. Rogers coming out to meet the boy and to spend time with him, but with him living in Pittsburgh, and them living in California, she knew it was probably never happen. But, you never know until you try, and one day, one particularly bad day, she wrote to Mr. Rogers about her son. And would you believe, he decided to make a trip to California.

Well the boy was incredibly nervous on the day Mr. Rogers was coming. He was having an awful morning. And when Mr. Rogers showed up the boy was already hitting himself, saying that he hated himself. His mom apologized to Mr. Rogers and started rolling the boy into the next room to try to get him to calm down. As she was leaving the room, she said they would understand if he needed to leave- that it might be awhile before her son calmed down. But Mr. Rogers just sat there and just smiled his gentle smile, and he said he'd like to stay, if that was ok. He said he wanted something from the boy. The mom looked kind of puzzled, but agreed, and left Mr. Rogers to sit there in her living room and wait.

The Word of the Lord, the presence of God had been so rare in that boy's life. But Mr. Rogers seemed determined to change that.

In our text this morning we hear about another boy, another boy who was having a pretty rough time growing up. In fact the text says when little Samuel was growing up the Word of the Lord, which is another way of saying the presence of God- well it was very rare indeed.

Samuel had basically been given up for adoption, and he was being taken care of by the priests. In the chapter before this we hear about the story of Hannah, how she had

been unable to have a child her whole life, and how her world kind of collapsed around her because of this. In the end she gave herself over to just praying in the temple night and day this kind of terrible desperation. And she promised, she bargained during these long hours that if she ever did have a child, she would dedicate him to God; she would give him over to the temple.

Well Hannah did conceive- she gave birth to a boy, and she named him Samuel, which means “God heard.” And true to her word, after she had nursed and weaned him, she took the boy to the priests at the temple, and said goodbye. The text says literally, “She left him there at the temple for the Lord.”

Can you imagine it? Wanting something so badly- only to hand it over? It must have been excruciating for her. But if it was hard for Hannah- it turned out to be devastating for Samuel.

Although she left him there for the Lord, as we hear in the beginning of our text this morning- the word of the Lord, the presence of God- oh, it was rare in those days. And it was particularly rare in that temple- Eli, the priest, he was failing. And his sons were destroying the place- stealing the sacrifices to forcing the women serving women into their beds.

This was the “family” little Samuel grew up with. It’s a wonder he didn’t start hitting himself, too.

Well, someone finally came to visit to Samuel- only it wasn’t Mr. Rogers- it was God.

God is calling to him at night, but because this has never happened before, he keeps thinking it must be the old priest, Eli. And he keeps getting up and waking up the old man, who has no idea what's going on and is getting angrier and angrier each time he's woken up.

Now, it's easy to miss the power of this part of the story. First it does have a kind of Whose On First quality to it, right? And I think this part of the story is a little bit funny. The other thing that makes it easy to miss what's going on is that we know that Samuel is going to grow up and be important. Heck, the book is named after him. And when he grows up, he's going to be a great prophet who anoints Saul as king- and then David.

And so we're not terribly surprised that God comes to him like this. After all, he's destined to become this great religious man. We kind of expect things like this to happen to important people.

But if you can imagine the first time this story was told, if you can imagine not knowing that Samuel was destined to become a great prophet- it's a really surprising story. It's a surprising story because if you've got a priest and you've got a little boy who is barely more than a slave, just abandoned at the temple, and you have to guess which of those two God is going to speak to- the smart money is on the priest every time. Hmmm...who is going to understand God better- a priest or a ragamuffin kid?

But the roles get all reversed here. They get all confused. The wise old priest- his eyes have grown dim. He's allowed his sons to all but destroy the temple. And he sleeps through the voice of God now. And this little boy who did little more than clean

dishes and scrub toilets- he's the one awake to the sound of God's voice, even when it's clear he doesn't even have a clue who this God is? This is definitely weird?

I think another reason why this story doesn't shock us like I think it probably did when it was heard by earlier audiences is that we're so much more used to roles reversing and changing today.

Melis and I like to joke that we believe in traditional, conservative, and rigid gender roles...we do...we just tend to flip them. She's got a great sense of direction, she's assertive, and I'm all "how are you feeling" and am definitely on the metro side of things. I'm ok with that. And it's not just me- our whole culture is a little more relaxed. I remember picking Will up from daycare one time and he and his friend were in these bright pink dresses, and they were as happy as they could be, and I remember thinking- wow, this would not have been ok even when I was growing up. But hey, we've grown a little. We know that women can be tough and strong. And men can be gentle and emotional.

And sometimes our technology causes us to reverse roles I've noticed. Back in New Jersey we were friends with this incredible older couple. Bob and Vergene were in their late 70's when we knew them, and they were incredibly wise and taught us so much and were so generous. I remember Vergene driving us into Manhattan one night, she was taking us into Carnegie Hall. She was doing about 80 through the Holland tunnel kind of weaving in and out of the lanes like New Yorkers do, my knuckles beginning to whiten as they held on to the door handle. In our relationship they were definitely the teachers, the helpers.

But then when we sold them our computer, I went over to set it up and answer any questions. And it soon became apparent that Vergene had never used a mouse before. I know this because she would stand up, and place both hands upon it, and she would move her whole body around the table, trying to make the cursor go where she wanted it to go. And believe me, trying to explain double clicking? It wasn't going to happen that day. And honestly, growing up with computers, I never really thought about using a mouse- you just do it. But I did my best, our usual roles very much reversed, me now being the teacher, she being the very recalcitrant, computer-phobic student.

Now that reversal wasn't so bad, but sometimes they can be painful- terribly painful. Nearly all of us will experience a time when our parents, the people who cared for us, who helped us grow up; the time will come when our roles will reverse, and it will be us needing to care for them. I know some of you have been through this- some of you are going through it right now. And even in the best of circumstances- this is just hard.

I remember one family back in Austin. When I first started at the church, this family had the woman's father living with them. And every so often I'd ask how things were going, hearing now and again things were beginning to be difficult. Well, it didn't take long before things started getting very bad indeed. Her father was starting to become disoriented at times, and he would become angry and difficult. And at the time he still had his license. And she invited me over to be with them when they asked him to hand over the car keys. And I'll tell you what, that was one awful afternoon. He yelled, he cried. He said to her, "I bought you your first car. And this is how you thank me?" And what else could she do but cry and tell him she did love him, and that they just wanted him to be safe.

No, a lot of the time when our roles reverse and change like this- it's just hard. It must have been hard, though the text doesn't say it, for Eli. When God stopped talking to him, and started talking to this little boy, this boy who had been abandoned by his family instead. It must have been hard for him when that role was reversed.

Well, Mr. Rogers was good to his word. He just sat in that families' living room as he heard that young man scream and wail and that poor mom tried to calm him down. And finally, finally, the boy emerged from the other room- it had been hours. And Mr. Rogers talked with him for a little bit, getting to know him. And then he said this. He said, "Do you remember that I would like you to do something for me?" And the boy nodded and used his computer to tell him he would do anything for Mr. Rogers. And Mr. Rogers smiled and said, "Well, I would like you to pray for me. Will you pray for me?" And the writer said the boy just didn't know how to respond. He was thunderstuck, as if he had been hit by something like lightning, and all he could do now is listen for the rumble.

And it must have been strange for him. No one had ever asked this boy to pray for them. No one had ever asked this boy to do anything for them. The boy had always been prayed for. People were always thinking of ways to help him- it was never the other way around.

The boy said at first that he didn't know if he could do it. And Mr. Rogers kept smiling and nodded, but he said nothing. And then the boy said, that maybe he could try. And Mr. Rogers told him he would like that. He would like that very much.

Later the reporter sat down with Mr. Rogers and complimented him for doing this. Junod said, “it was really smart- knowing that asking the boy for his prayers would make the boy feel better about himself.” But Mr. Rogers, who first looked confused, then said with laughter, “Oh heavens no, Tom! I didn’t ask him for his prayers to help him; I asked them for me. Anyone who has gone through challenges like that must be very close to God, I think. Tom, I asked him because I wanted his help.”

Ever since this Junod has been checking in periodically with the boy’s mom- she said he still has tough days, but that since he has started praying for Mr. Rogers he has never once said that he wanted to die. He said he believed Mr. Rogers was close to God, and that if Mr. Rogers likes him, that that must mean God likes him, too.

You know, in both these stories we start out thinking we know who the characters are. We know Samuel, this abandoned boy, is in serious need of help. And we know this boy Mr. Rogers visits needs more help than probably anybody can muster.

But somewhere along the way in both of these stories- the roles get all mixed up, don’t they? Everything becomes wonderfully confused. We aren’t sure at some point who are the helpers and who are the helped. Samuel and Eli play both roles. Mr. Rogers and that boy play both, too.

You know I think this is one of the reasons why we keep coming to the Lord’s table month after month. I think we keep coming here because it’s the only place I know where we come and are roles are so reversed and confused. We come to be fed, to be

helped. And we are. We are fed. We are helped. And we are at the very same time asked to feed one another, and are asked to go out and become helpers. Normally, we have to choose which of these roles we want- but at the table we get to do both.

Beloved, who is it that needs you today? Who is it that needs your help? Who needs you to pray for them? And who is it that is already and at this very moment loving you and being kind to you and bringing you grace upon grace upon grace? **Amen.**