



March 1, 2022

What Do You Want to Be?

By The Rev. Sam Sheridan

“What do you want to be when you grow up?”

“Kind” said the boy.

From *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse* by Charlie Mackesy

I started telling people I wanted to be a priest when I was ten years old. Before priest, I really wanted to be a dalmatian. I thought it would be cool to live at the firehouse all day and to have spots. But by ten, I realized that I'd need a more realistic goal. (Dalmatians only hire from within.) I settled on priest for many reasons and, by now, almost all of them are lost in the fog of time. I feel called to be a priest now, but the decades it took me to get here have blurred, bent, and changed all my reasons.

The dreams of childhood aren't necessarily lost with time; they simply grow their roots deep into our being and sprout in ways our childhood selves couldn't possibly have imagined.

Now, my wife and I are expecting a son in July. I wonder, often, what to teach him; what to ask him; what to tell him is most important in life. Most people do not keep the same professional ambition from when they are ten to thirty-four, so I also have to figure out how to encourage him to change his mind if he wants to change it – while hoping he'll have the strength of character to resist giving up on dreams he wants to keep.

What do I want him to be when he grows up? Children get asked this all the time and they're taught to interpret it as a question about jobs. That's not bad in and of itself. From parents or teachers, this question can be wielded to begin forming the relationship between goals and behavior. If you ask your child what they want to be and they say an astronaut, for instance, okay, well, that means learning a lot of math and science, so let's get started on this homework.

That does have upsides. Having a job is good. Work is good. Contributing to your community and society is an important part of life. That kind of accomplishment appropriately gives many people pride and fulfillment.

Still, I keep coming back to the belief that what someone ends up doing with their life is not at all the same as what they want to be.

Bankers, civil rights attorneys, garbage collectors, nurses, teachers, astronauts, sculptors – these are all jobs. They – along with millions of other kinds of jobs – are important in our world. But for every definition of a “good” and “bad” person you could be a good or bad person and have any of these jobs.

So, I mull these things over. I ask my spiritual director, my wife, my brother who has children of his own. I wonder what the world needs most, or what I have observed is most lacking in the world around me. I vowed to pattern my own life after scripture, so I go there, too, and look for what it is I might instill in my son that would honor God, even if he ends up choosing not to have a relationship with the God his father and mother worship.

What do I want him to be?

Kind.

What could the world need more than people who want to be kind?! Not the kindness that is manners, but the deeper, truer, loving kindness that our Bibles say originates with God. The King James version of the Bible mostly translates this as “mercy.” Our biblical narrators are constantly calling us to respond to God’s loving kindness with loving kindness of our own. Usually, the biblical logic is that this is what will be best for the world. But my son will also need it for himself. Kindness is chief among the things he’ll need more of at every stage of his life. It’s a thing he can be, and become, and strive for all at once.

It’s a goal he could set, and achieve, and still have room for improvement. It’s a dream I can invite him to in his childhood, which can be lost in that fog of growing up but take root deep in his being and sprout up in ways he doesn’t expect – and that I may never get to see.

And if my son does not want to learn to be kind from me – which is not totally beyond imagining, since humans all inherit and revel in rebellion – it is something worth my working on anyway. Because kind is what I want to be when I grow up, too.

Growing in kindness is for me, for him, for the world, and for God. It will make us better bankers, teachers, and astronauts – but it will also just make us better people. What more could I want for my son?

She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue (Proverbs 31:26).