

## “Who Is Your Role Model?”

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Richard C. Allen

February 24, 2013

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

In his Letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul invites the church people to consider carefully who they choose to be their role models for their Christian journey. Though I think of the term, ‘role model,’ as a modern designation, it was clearly on Paul’s mind two thousand years ago. He sees that a role model has a huge influence on the decisions we make; thus, his advice is to choose carefully and prayerfully. So, the question for today is: ‘who is your role model when it comes to the life of faith?’

I’ve given this matter considerable thought. At first, I came up with internationally known giants in our Christian tradition, people like Bishop Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. But, as influential as these voices have been in my own faith formation, I didn’t actually know any of them personally. Reflecting further, I identified three people I have known well, men and women who have modeled for me what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. All three turn out to be lay persons! I’d like to tell you a bit about each person. This I do in the hope that you will spend time later today or this week reflecting on the individuals you would name as having contributed richly to your own understanding of Christian discipleship, and also to realize that someone may be naming YOU as their role model!

The first person is Marie Edwards. She was one of those women who lived out on the prairie and had a relationship with the land. Into her 70’s and 80’s she raised a few beef cattle, kept an enormous garden, and insisted on doing most of the work herself. I don’t know of a more independent woman.

Her cash income barely paid her taxes and afforded the essentials. Yet, there was always a smile on her face and a distinctive joy in her voice. Her cheeks were always red and she wore her graying hair pulled back in a bun. Her face looked like a leather baseball glove. What I remember most is that at harvest time, Marie would dig her hills of potatoes by hand, with a potato fork, and bring a full sack of her Kennebecs to the church as her offering. They would be the best of the crop, the big baking potatoes, the kind that make a whole meal unto themselves. The church received those potatoes, sold them at the fall auction and used the proceeds to do its ministry and mission. Everybody in town knew her potatoes were the best thing she had. So, in bringing a full sack to the church, she was modeling what it means to surrender to God the best of your bounty.

Though Marie was as independent as the day is long, it was her spirit of generosity that got into my bones and shaped my faith and forged my understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. She modeled for me the side of Jesus that finds joy in surrendering to God our very best. She is buried there on the prairie. I visit her grave when I attend a Sioux YMCA meetings. And I thank her for her potatoes. Which of your role models demonstrates that same spirit of generosity?

I think of Lloyd Case who was active in the Wisconsin parish I served in the 1980's. A hog and dairy farmer, he had the world's most compassionate heart. At that time, America was busy helping to re-settle refugee families from Vietnam. It was a particularly bad decade for our nation's farmers. Many had over-extended their credit with the local banks and farm foreclosures were happening every day. The Farm Aid Movement began at this time, farmers helping neighbors to stay on the family farm, to survive on the land that had been in the family for generations. We hosted many community meetings at our church to discuss how congregations could support the likes of the Case Family.

So, when our town was approached by the refugee resettlement agency to receive a family of six, set them up with an apartment, help them with English, find them jobs, and help them get established socially; I couldn't imagine where the energy would come from. People were literally scared to death about losing the family farm, never mind settling a strange family from a strange country.

At a deacon meeting, Lloyd Case spoke from that place of faith, from that place of actually believing that with God 'all things are possible.' Lloyd never really hesitated, never batted an eye. 'Sure,' he said, 'we can welcome a family here in Lancaster. Welcoming a family is what we know how to do.'

Lloyd Case was one of those awesome disciples who acted upon his faith, who believed in removing barriers to getting God's work done. "With God, all things are possible" was no mere platitude, no cute bumper sticker. It was the foundation stone for this man's faith. He was my role model at that time. His faith shaped mine. When Rev. Bill VanderWyden came here to do a feasibility study for our \$3.7 million capital campaign, he asked me if I thought it were possible. Having been shaped by Lloyd Case, I told Rev. VanderWyden I believed we could. Lloyd is buried there in the local cemetery. I aim to visit his grave before I die to tell him how he was a role model for a young minister just learning the ropes.

We often assume our role models will be wise elders, people older and more experienced than ourselves. But sometimes it is a child or a youth or a college student who teaches us something about faith, who lives out their faith in a remarkable way, in a way that shapes who we are forever. Thus it is with my third role model. That would be Marc Feldmann.

When Marc was in Confirmation Class and wrote his faith statement at the end of the year, he chose to write about the Holy Spirit. He said, ‘the Holy Spirit is that feeling I get just before I make a big decision.’ What he meant is that he took his big decisions to God and waited for a word of wisdom. Even at age 15, Marc had learned to count on the Spirit to inform his thinking regarding what for him amounted to big decisions. I suppose that meant whether to take AP Chemistry or whether to accept the invitation to attend the University of Michigan, or whether to invite that one certain young lady to the prom.

Marc’s faith statement is engraved on his tombstone at Old Church Cemetery, just up the road on Route 17. It’s all the way back towards the river, as far as you can go at the west end of the graveyard. I took the Confirmation class there last year. I’ll do so again this spring. Whenever I go there for a burial, I walk to Marc’s holy ground and thank him for teaching me to trust my big decisions to the Holy Spirit. It makes me feel like we are soul brothers. He couldn’t have known it at the time, and maybe I didn’t either. But on reflection, I see that Marc. W. Feldmann was a role model for his pastor.

When Paul wrote his Epistle to the Church at Philippi, he knew that Christians need role models, men and women who, by the way they live their lives, demonstrate the essence of our Faith. He urged the church people to choose wisely. Today, I am thanking God for these three and for the dozens of others who have been role models for me in my Christian journey. The invitation is for all of you to do the same. It’s a simple exercise that will warm your heart. Do this, in the greatest of hope! Amen.

