

I imagine many of you, like me, watched the political conventions of the past two weeks. It's all great "theater" – even if this year somewhat more intimate than the spectacles of past years thanks to the ravages of the coronavirus. One of the things I noticed in speaker after speaker is how often they would bring up role models. In some cases it was some politician from what they considered "better days gone by." Others spoke of their parents or their grandparents or a favorite teacher or an "unknown" they had met on the campaign trail whom they had found inspiring.

If I were to ask you today who your role models were, who would you name? Perhaps a Mother Teresa or a Desmond Tutu, a Ghandi or a Ronald Reagan or a Barack Obama. Or perhaps *your* mom or dad. Not all of us would name the same people. And the names on some of our lists would horrify others whose lists were quite different. But one person I bet *none of us* would name...would be ourselves.

You see, I don't think the vast majority of us think of ourselves as role models. In some back corner of our brains, we probably know that, at least to someone, we *are*. But we prefer to ignore it because there is a great advantage in not thinking of ourselves that way. If we don't think of ourselves as role models we can be freed of the need to ponder the effect of our actions on others. We can ignore the need for change most of us know lurks just under our skin. We can "fade into the woodwork" and that's just fine with us.

However, as our Epistle today reminds us – yes, I've decided to stick with the Epistle for a second week in a row – we don't have a choice as to whether or not we are role models. *We are* role models. The only choice we have is whether to be models for *good* or models for *ill*. We have a choice about whether to "hold fast to what is good" as Paul describes it in verse 9 of today's passage, or to be "haughty" (verse 16), "claim[ing] to be wiser than [we] are." We can choose to be patient in suffering, and to extend hospitality to strangers – or we can choose to repay evil for evil.

Many years ago, I attended a clergy conference in the Diocese of Massachusetts led by a fellow named Edwin Friedman. He had just written a tremendous little book, *Generation to Generation*, in which he spoke about the importance of our roles as role models:

- How do we help people around us who are dealing with highly emotional events?
- How do we lead people through change without going into crisis?

One of the things I reflected on this summer when I had a little more time than usual to think about such things, is how much I needed to get back in touch with the lessons Friedman and folks like him had instilled in me over the years. I realized how much better I could have been as a role model in dealing with some of the emotional and critical issues we've been facing as a shared ministry over the past several years. (An upcoming retirement can force thinking like that, and this pandemic hasn't helped – I keep bringing evaluative thoughts to the fore.) As I spent some of this prayerful and reflective time, I realized that, without meaning to, I'd become what folks in addiction work say is the worst thing you can possibly be: an *enabler*.

To some extent that is a very natural instinct for most of us. We like to think we're doing just the right thing when we set out to solve one or more of the world's messy problems merely by tackling it head on ourselves. But that ignores something very sacramental and very important. Sometimes you have to let folks find their way forward without doing all the leading yourself. You have to be there...be *with* them...model *to* them by who *you* are...who *Christ* is. But you can't do it *for* them. And, too often, that's what I've been doing as a priest. *Doing* a lot of ministry rather than teaching *you* to do the ministry.

That's not the way *Jesus* did it...and isn't *he* supposed to be our *ultimate* role model? Jesus spent his entire ministry modeling to us what it is to be engaged with the world while at the same time not losing focus on the importance of his *disciples* to everything he was out to accomplish. He relies on his *disciples* to get the work done. Not that he wasn't willing to get sweaty and hungry and spent for the sake of serving God and sowing the seeds for what would, in time, become the Church. But, ultimately, he trained *them* to do the ministry, sent them out two by two, and, as John's Gospel tells us, empowered them to carry on after he knew he would be physically no longer in their midst.

Paul picks up on this and carries the ball forward. He tells the fledgling church in Rome that to be a follower of Christ is to model God's ways every day and, so far as possible, in every way – as intentionally and as consciously as we can.

When we ignore a poor person or an addict or speak disparagingly of one who differs from us, when we complain about "the church" but do nothing to help remake the Church

in Christ's loving image, backbiting instead of loving, going negative instead of positive, we are failing our job as role models. When we call ourselves Christian...and then give only a half a percent or perhaps only one or two percent of our income to sustain Christ's work, that undermines our ability to be a role model.

We model something and we get to choose what that something is.

- We choose.
- *We* choose, you and I.
- No one does it *for* us.
- *We choose.*

Every time we vote, we make a choice regarding the values that lie behind that vote.

Some years ago, I remember reading in one of Desmond Tutu's books (I forget which one) how important this matter is to his daily prayer life. He wakes up in the morning and decides what he is going to model that day. I suspect Mother Teresa did much the same. I know this time of "coronavirus sabbatical" has made me think more intentionally about how I am called to model this in my life as your Vicar.

When we claim, with our free will, to *choose* some way of living out our baptismal vows, we are following the way of Christ – and the way set forth in today's Epistle by Paul. My prayer for each of us is that we have the courage to choose wisely – today, tomorrow, and forever.