

Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
July 18, 2010

Genesis 1:26-27; John 4:3-30
"Connections: Role Models"

This sermon and next week's sermon are about human connections. The topic today is "role models" and next week is "friends."

The *World Book Dictionary* describes "role model" as a person whose behavior, especially that exhibited in a particular capacity, serves as a model or standard for another person to follow.

American Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, Russell Baker, is quoted as saying: "I am unclear what a "role model" is, but those who used the term seemed to be saying that teachers are people children tend to emulate." Molly Rademacher is one such teacher.

I was consoling a friend whose father had just died. I asked him how his children were doing. He said sorely that they hardly knew their grandfather and really didn't feel anything except for a distant sadness. He was no role model and therefore not really missed. We know of grandparents who have wonderful relationships with their grandchildren and are good role models.

Role models come in all guises. It occurred to me that even a younger adult sibling can be a role model for an older sister or brother. While "friend" might be a better category siblings sometimes look up to the sibling who has become a model in business, family or community.

Parents are obvious role models until death us do part and after death. We have role models in our employment and careers. When you first started in business or area of work who was your role model or guide? Who was your favorite teacher and why?

We have role models and we are role models. Given this I wondered if there was a scripture that gave us an adequate one, two and three with regards to role modeling. The wonderful story of Jesus and the woman by the well does such. But first, a worst-case scenario.

It's a 20 year old story about a little boy and a baseball player. The story can happen in any professional sports: soccer, baseball, golf, football, tennis or basketball. This story was in my file.

It appeared in the New York Times and was entitled "A Mom's Plea to a Ball Player." I will summarize the story here but have posted the full article on the far side board in the Fellowship Hall. It's worth reading. Fortunately it is not representative of baseball or baseball players at large.

The mother in this story writes about her son whose passion was baseball and Gregg Jefferies a rookie second baseman of the New York Mets was his hero.

The boy had a huge picture of Jefferies in his bedroom and put a Jefferies baseball card in the middle of his 7th birthday cake. The mother heard that Jefferies was going to be signing autographs in a New Jersey toy shop. He wasn't just signing autographs he was selling them.

Hearing that advance purchase was advised the mother bought three tickets at \$10 a shot. The night before the signing her son hardly slept. He rose early and donned his Mets uniform

Hundreds of little Mets in uniform were in line outside the shop when they got there. The store was selling balls, photographs and baseball cards which Jefferies would sign. They stood in the line for a brief while and finally reached Jefferies.

The mother writes: "He sat with his cute girl friend at a table, signing his name as fast as he could. Gregg did not look up when he signed our son's pictures. He never saw our son's face go white, his eyes pleading to make contact. This was an assembly-line operation. Ninety seconds after we had entered the shop, we stood outside, autographs in hand."

All the way home the boy sat quietly and glumly in the back seat. His mother exasperated by his misery tried to console him. He said: "Mom, he didn't even look at me." The mother replied that the format wasn't right for a visit or eye contact. Her son said: "Yeah, but Mom, he's my guy. My all time top guy. You don't understand, Mom. He's my hero."

It is not difficult to see the unfortunate alienation in this situation. The family wondered how much money was netted in the event so the mother called the store. The store owner would not disclose the finances but offered some advice: "In today's world, it's never good to get too close to your heroes. Better to view them from afar."

The mother concludes: "But I don't want today's world to be like that. And I wish Gregg Jefferies would take his signature off the market."

The simple lesson of this story is that role models fulfill their role when they acknowledge, recognize and appreciate the persons looking to them as models. Jefferies sold his signature and his soul. I doubt whether the boy looked up to him again.

The gospel as always offers an alternative vision – this time in the story of Jesus with the woman at the well. The significance of the story in this context is not that a man in a highly patriarchal society and a Jew in enmity with Samaritans defies these barriers and sits and speaks with a Samaritan woman. It's about a prophet and teacher – known as such by his disciples and quickly perceived by the woman – who doesn't lord it over people but meets everyone on their own turf and terms and sensitively engages them.

The one, two and three of this story is this:

One: Jesus did not avoid contact. He made the woman feel important simply by speaking with her in defiance of the patriarchy of the day. The disciples are astonished that he did this. Role models make contact. We cannot be role models if we are not physically present with those who look to us as role models.

Two: We never get a sense that Jesus was patronizing. He engages the woman like an equal, not in knowledge but in humanity as the Hebrew text states: Everyone is created in the image of God and therefore equal in the eyes of God. We cannot lead if we don't affirm – paradoxically – our co-equal nature with everyone as children of God.

Three: We don't know how Jesus knew about the woman's former marriages. Role models learn all they can about the people who look to them. It is not so much about showing our feathers but being interested in, learning about and engaging the one looking to us.

The one, two and three are practically spiritual and Jesus adds another overtly spiritual dimension. Water becomes living water. He is the Messiah. Role models share in word, deed and example spiritual qualities. Our children, grandchildren, students and significant others who look to us appreciate our spirituality and especially when that spirituality is caring and compassionate.

God ain't finished with any one of us yet.

In conclusion, I shall tell a story of a lovely role model. The story is a traditional one about a stay-at-home mom. Today women and men make valid choices to work at home or outside the home. We have stay-at-home moms and dads. We have moms and dads out in the workforce. There is no cookie cutter scenario today.

Jose Hobday tells her story. "When I was growing up my favorite day of the week was Tuesday. Tuesday was ironing day. From the time I was a very little girl, my mother and I did the ironing on Tuesday. Once I got into school, we did it after I got home. (For the first few years, my iron wasn't hot. I had a little toy one. Then, I got a real iron and began to work on simple things like handkerchiefs and napkins. Slowly I moved up to pillowcases and shirts, and finally to large tablecloths that took a long time.)

I loved Tuesdays, not only because I was doing just what my mother did and she was teaching me to do it well, but also because it was the time when I met my mother in her girlhood. We would often just waste time together.

Sometimes we got out the photo album and looked at pictures from my mother's youth. We put it on the desk near our workplace and looked at the photos and talked about them. We were sharing our lives. I would tell her what was going on with me. Here my mother learned about my comings and goings, how I was doing in school, what I thought about things. My mother would tell me about herself and she would sing the songs she

learned as a young girl and teach them to me. I, too, would teach her the songs I had learned in school or heard on the radio.

My mother showed me pictures of her boyfriends, and I would wonder about her life. And Tuesdays were the days when I got my sex education. My mother talked about everything.

She asked me one question over and over again. What do you think are the most important things to look for in the person you are going to marry? My answer to her question usually centered on the usual things – handsome, red convertible, lots of money – things that are important when you're in the fourth grade. The requirements would change from year to year. In the seventh grade my partner had to be good in sports. In the eighth grade, it was poetry.

One Tuesday it occurred to me to ask my mother what she had looked for when she got married. I can't remember all of her requirements, but two of them stick in my mind. One was that her partner had to have a good sense of humor. She also would say that spirituality was very important to her. Her partner had to be a person with some sense of the meaning of life and of what was really important. When she told me that, it changed the way I looked at my mother and father. I began to see love in a more adult way. I began to see also how choices can make a real difference in one's life.

Amen.