

The Eyes Have It August 10, 2008

You may have heard the story about the pastor who owned a parrot of which he was very fond. However, the bird had picked up a rather nasty set of cuss words from a previous owner, and after a couple of really embarrassing episodes, the pastor decided he would have to have his parrot put to sleep, unless he could stop the foul language.

A woman in his congregation intervened, telling him that she might have a remedy for the problem. She suggested that he bring the parrot over to meet her well-behaved female parrot. She told the pastor that her bird was an absolute saint, who just sat quietly on her perch day after day praying. “Why don’t you bring your parrot over and see if my own bird’s good influence doesn’t reform him?”

The pastor thought it was worth a try, and the next day he arrived and the parrot arrived there. The parrot took one look at his new female companion and said, “Hey, good lookin’, how about a kiss?” The female parrot quickly responded, “My prayers have been answered!”

Influence—it’s a powerful force, and virtually all of us have many people, events and experiences that have a profound influence on our lives—some for good, and some that are not so positive. In the case of the parrots, that one was the reverse of what was wanted and hoped for!

It seems to me that the lack of positive role models may, in fact, have a lot to do with all the violence and crime we are experiencing in our city, and that has been borne out by some studies that have been conducted in the past. Many of those who are imprisoned, homeless, struggling in school, jobless are those who, when asked or even pressed, admit that there was no one in their lives to look up to—no one who was a positive role model, a positive influence on his or her life.

The reality is that each of us, whether we know it or not, is a role model, an example, an influencer of someone else. Charlotte Davis-Kast put it like this, “Whether or not you have children yourself, you are a parent to the next generation. If we can only stop thinking of children as individual property and think of them as the next generation, then we can realize we all have a role to play.”

On a daily basis, we are having an influence on at least one other person—it’s impossible not to! We may be influencing a co-worker, a student in a classroom, our children, our neighbors, strangers on the street. WE have a choice as to what kind of influence we have, but I believe that each of us who claims to be a person of faith, has a responsibility to exert a positive influence on everyone we encounter.

However, we don’t always do that very well. In fact, I heard someone say something that I consider to be quite sad, but all too often true. This person’s statement was something along the lines of “The people

who talk most about being Christian are least likely to act like Christians!”

That’s a pretty strong indictment, but unfortunately, I’ve heard stories that bear out that statement. In fact, a year or so ago, a person who shall remain unnamed, shared with me that she had recently had occasion to serve a group of “church folks”—at least that’s what she called them. Her comment was that they were the rudest, most difficult people with whom she’d ever had to work! Those “church folks,” perhaps even without knowing it, had an influence, and not a good one, on someone who might have been influenced quite differently.

How is it that we influence and serve as positive role models for others? It all has to do with the way we live our lives. Jesus certainly knew that, and we probably come closer to living positive lives when we model our lives after his.

We can also heed the advice that an unknown writer offered to pastors who were in the trenches trying to lead their people. That’s what’s being offered in the Bible passage we have for this morning. It’s from a letter, long ago attributed to Paul, but no longer believed to be from his hand. Rather it’s from someone on the ground who understands the difficult circumstances faced by the early church, and who was trying to counsel pastors in how to influence those around him for good.

Our one verse is short, sweet and to the point. It says this: “Teach with your life: by word, by demeanor, by love, by faith, by integrity.” In other words, we “teach,” or influence others by the very act of living. Everything we do, every action, tells who we are, and has an influence. That’s what a writer—Clarence Budington Kellan, who considered himself a little known author, said when he wrote, “He didn’t tell me how to live; he lived and let me watch him do it!”

Robert Fulghum offered a similar sentiment when he wrote, “Don’t worry that children never listen to you. Worry that they are always watching you.” Marian Wright Edelman put it even more directly, speaking to us as the forerunners of future generations: “If you as parents cut corners, your children will, too. If you lie, they will, too. If you spend all your money on yourselves and tithe no portion of it for charities, colleges, churches, synagogues and civic causes, your children won’t either. And if parents snicker at racial and gender jokes, another generation will pass on the poison adults still have not had the courage to snuff out.”

That’s pretty heavy stuff, but it says to you and me that we have an awesome responsibility—a huge responsibility to be the best possible role model and a positive example. We teach, we influence with our lives, and as the Bible passage says, “by word, by demeanor, by love, by faith, by integrity.”

Let’s think about that. “By word,” we read. What words come out of our mouths, and more importantly, is what we say consistent with how we act and behave? Remember that Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say.” Our actions need to bear witness to our words, because those with whom we come in contact

may not hear what we say, but their eyes are watching what we do. How is that coming across?

What we're really saying here is that the old adage, "Actions speak louder than words" is really true. We set an example by our actions, by what we do, and others are watching. It is, as Albert Einstein once said, "Setting an example is not the main means of influencing another; it is the only means."

Maybe we can see that a little better if we were to pause for just a moment, and think about someone, or probably more than one someone, who has been a positive example, someone who's had a strong influence on our lives. I could jot down several names; how about you? What is it, or was it, about that person that so impacted our lives, our attitudes, our understandings?

For me, my Dad was one. In my early years, Madison, Indiana, was, like most other towns in southern Indiana, a segregated community. There was a black grade school and high school, but I was completely oblivious to that at the time. I just knew that folks with a different color skin from mine lived very close to where we drove to take flowers to the cemetery in Madison.

I don't recall ever talking about what I began to observe, but I remember distinctly what my Dad did as we made our way to the cemetery. He'd wave at this person, pull over and talk with that one. He'd stop the car, get out and chat for what seemed to me to be a very long time with someone he knew particularly well. He treated all of them, and actually everyone, the same. He never said a word; he set a good example for me as to how we should treat one another—how we could be kind, loving, friendly and positive with everyone we meet. That's an example I strive daily to live.

Thinking about this message has caused me to reflect on the importance of role models in our lives, and how important they are for children, for women, for minorities, and for all of us. It's important to have those people in our lives that've gone before us and walked the road we may just be beginning to walk down. We all need them, and the reality is that each of us is, to one person or another, a role model, an example. The question we have to ask is, "What kind of role model am I? Is someone watching the way I live my life? Do my actions speak of love, faith, integrity?" Is someone out there saying, maybe not even consciously, "I want to be like that?" How would you answer? How would I?

Closing:

The golfer, Tiger Woods, made a very good comment, in my opinion, about what it means to be a positive role model. He said, "I think it's an honor to be a role model to one person or maybe more than that. If you are given a chance to be a role model, I think you should always take it because you can influence a person's life in a positive light, and that's what I want to do. That's what it's all about."

As we leave here this morning, I hope that we're aware that we all have the chance to be a role model. We just have to live our lives in such a way that we are a good one! I pray that we are.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.