

Life As a Not-So-Super Model

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, January 17, 2010 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Their faces grace the covers of magazines. When they go out in public, the paparazzi dog their every step. They use their extraordinary good looks to sell products, from clothes to cars to cosmetics. Some even have fragrances named after them.

I'm talking about supermodels, who represent the epitome of physical perfection and beauty, and make a very good living from it. Back in the 80's and 90's, the famous "Big Six" – Claudia Schiffer, Cindy Crawford, Kate Moss, Linda Evangelista, Naomi Campbell and Christy Turlington – made multimillions, collectively dominating magazine covers, fashion runways, editorial pages, and both print and broadcast advertising. The word on the street was that they wouldn't even get out of bed for less than \$10,000 a day. Everyone knew their names and faces.

Chances are that no one hearing this sermon will ever enter the rarified atmosphere of the life of a supermodel. But there are other ways to make a living off your looks. Take Ellen Surratt, for instance. Sure, you have never heard of her, but you almost certainly have seen her – well, at least her hands, that is. Ellen is a top hand model. She is sometimes a "hand double" for celebrities in ads or films. Usually, she makes \$1,000 an hour for holding the product in an ad for soaps, soups, shampoo – you name it. Since her hands are her livelihood, she takes precautions, including wearing gloves every minute that she is not working. She also doesn't cook, clean, open doors or play sports – all in order to protect her hands.

Normally, when we think of models, we think of people who are nice to look at, either in part (for example, there are hand, foot, leg and lips models) or in whole. But there is another kind of model that I want you to think about today – the working model. That is, think about a prototype, often in miniature, of some machine or system or organization that is used to test and demonstrate how something is supposed to work. I want you to think about that kind of model, because if you are a Christian, you are a part of one. The church is a model created by God to show the world what God intends for all creation.

The notion of the church as a model is what lies behind the text we read this morning from 1 Corinthians. The Apostle Paul is writing to the Christians in that city, describing for them just how the model is supposed to work. He needs to write to them because there are some big glitches in the model as it is.

At the root of the problem is the fact that Corinth was a very unusual place in the Roman Empire. Most of the great cities were long established, with social structures that were very solid and inflexible. People knew and accepted their places in the social order. But Corinth was a relatively young city, having been re-founded only a century earlier after being destroyed by the Romans in their war with the Greeks many years earlier. Corinth was also a city that became quite wealthy, due to its strategic location. Thus, Corinth was a place where a person could hope to rise up through the ranks and make a name for himself or herself. Corinth was a city of unusual opportunity.

As such, Corinth attracted the ambitious. And when the Apostle Paul started a church in Corinth, many of the earliest members were people imbued with ambition and ego. Soon, they carried their competitive natures into the life of the church, even into worship, each trying to prove that they were better, wiser, more spiritual. Fractures and factions naturally developed. Slogans were used to divide, and people claimed allegiance to various leaders.

When word regarding all these problems reached Paul, he wrote the letter we call 1 Corinthians. He addressed a variety of specific issues that were dividing the Corinthians, but in chapters 12 and 13, he addresses the big issue of what the church is supposed to be and how it is to operate. And the message Paul sends is that the church is not supposed to be just like the surrounding world, except with the word “Jesus” stenciled on it. No, the church is supposed to be a real alternative to the world, a living, breathing example – or model -- of what God wills for the whole world to be. What we read in our text is part of Paul’s description of this church that is to be a model for the world. People are different. Paul knows that.

The goal is not to make everyone the same, he says. The goal is to get everybody working together, accepting each other and cooperating with each other rather than competing with each other and putting each other down: Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and the Spirit gives them to each one, just as the Spirit determines.

Paul was asking the Corinthians to stop seeing their spiritual gifts and natural talents as status symbols, and to begin seeing them instead as community resources. They weren’t meant for self-aggrandizement, but for benefit of all. If the people in the church at Corinth could grasp the

idea that they were “one body,” existing with and for each other, then they could fulfill God’s intention for them: that they be a model of what God wants the whole world to be.

I guess you could say that the church is called to be a role model for the world. Role models are so important. Some of us are fortunate enough to have good role models in our parents. Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children’s Defense Fund and the first African American woman permitted to practice law in Mississippi, says, “I feel I am the luckiest child in the world to have had a mother and father who lived, rather than just preached, their faith and family values.” Through her parents’ example, she learned that being honest was more important than being honored. She learned first-hand that faith was safer and more enduring than fame.

Marian was the youngest of five children. Her father was a Baptist preacher who, Marian says, lived every day the faith he preached on Sunday. He was an example for her and her brothers and sisters as well as for their community. Marian’s mother worked in the background but exhibited that same practical faith. Her mother kept both their home and the church running smoothly.

A recent movie about Baltimore Ravens offensive lineman Michael Oher is basically about the power of positive role models. Oher was a homeless teenager when he was taken in and encouraged by the Tuohy family. Stories abound about individual role models, or families that model what a family should be for others who have no other way of knowing.

But the church is an even more ambitious undertaking – a role model for the world, a model of a community of people working together to create the kind of world God wants – a place where everyone matters and is valued, where differences don’t divide people, but draw them together in ways that allow them to bless one another.

Now we must be honest – the church does not always live up to this high calling. It does not always function as a good role model. The church in Corinth didn’t, and no church I have ever heard of has managed to perform perfectly. Most of the time, churches are not-so-super models of what God wants the whole world to be.

But frequent failure is no reason to abandon the effort. As long as we confess and acknowledge our faults, both to God and to the watching world, then we can still play the part – as long as we don’t give up. And there will be plenty of times when we will get it right, and the world can take notice.

Let me tell you about one congregation that managed to get it right. Epiphany Lutheran lost all but 175 of its 1,500 members as thousands of whites fled the city from the 1950s to the 1990s. Remaining congregants had little contact with the Chaldeans and blacks who make up most of the surrounding neighborhoods.

"We were frankly someplace where older white people came in to have their church and then leave," the Rev. Richard Hillenbrand said.

For the church to survive, Hillenbrand knew, it would have to change. So it reached out in new directions, opening its doors for crime prevention workshops, Head Start programs, a summer camp, movies for children. The biggest step came last spring when church leaders, who used to chase people off their spacious front lawn, turned that lawn into a community park.

Epiphany Lutheran has become a place that brings people of very different cultures and traditions together and has created a community that works together to accomplish great things for the glory of God.

Here's another example. A Christian pastor from India says that the church, though small, makes a big impact there, because it is different.

"In many ways, we are not so different from our neighboring Hindu and Muslim congregations," the pastor says. "They have worship. They try to live moral lives. They provide help and education for their members. But in my area, only Christians strive, however ineptly, to mix men and women of different castes, races and social groups. That's the difference."

In another letter, Paul famously wrote, "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free." Those differences, which mattered immensely in the world where the first Christians lived, did not matter inside the church. The church was a place of equality, a place where people who were different could come together as equals – regardless of race, regardless of gender, regardless of wealth or poverty, even regardless of intelligence or ability. The church is a place where we all get reminded that we are a part of something bigger and more important than ourselves; we are a part of what God is doing in the world, a very significant part – part of the model God is providing, so that the world can see the possibility of something better than the age-old patterns of competition, prejudice, discrimination, and violence.

Some of you may know of Anne Lamott, author of several books, including *Traveling Mercies*. In that book she wrote, "I make my son Sam go to church because I can. I outweigh him by nearly 75 pounds. But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. People with a deep sense of spirituality follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful Our funky

little church is filled with people who are working for peace and freedom, who are out there on the streets and inside praying, and they are home writing letters, and they are at the shelters with giant platters of food.” Lamott notes that these people are people who otherwise might not come together. They are so different in many ways. But the church brings them together and helps them understand and appreciate each other.

A church like that is a role model. And every time we in this congregation manage to work together, in spite of any and all differences, we are that kind of role model, too. We are one body, we all matter, and each has a role to play. So may we each discover that role and perform it humbly and well, cooperatively and compassionately, that the world may know God has something better in mind for all creation.

Amen.