

As our archdiocese looks to kick off the synod this Lent with small groups, we are currently wrapping up some of our facilitator/leader training, and people will be invited to join coming up here in just a week and a half as Lent starts. The whole point of the groups will be to evangelize; to help people feel comfortable sharing their faith within the group, and then ideally better equipped to do that in the world as we are all sent. And as for how this is done, it entails praying so we grow in our own personal faith with the Lord, helping the poor (both materially and in spirit), and not being afraid to testify to the faith through words and actions.

Just finishing Catholic Schools' Week, it's no secret that the Catholic School system is there in part to evangelize students. But what about a Christian teacher working in a public school?

Recently I read the story called "Thank you, Miss Evridge," told from the perspective of Pastor Joseph Falkner, who as his title suggests grew up to become a minister. And this was in part to the evangelization of a junior high school teacher.

Looking back, he reflects that perhaps you've seen her. She may be a member of your church, a soloist in your choir. It's possible she's on the mission field. For 10 years she had a profound influence on his life, and then she vanished.

He writes if you know her, tell her I said thanks. Thanks. That word seems so inadequate for someone who contributed so much to molding his character and shaping his future. But he wants to express his gratitude, which he does in his story.

He'd write her a letter or pick up the phone and tell her thank you in a more personal way if he could. Several years ago, she mailed him a wedding announcement, but he lost it, and in so doing lost his only contact with her. He knows she has a new name now, but to him she will always be "Miss Evridge."

Moving up to junior high was one of the most frightening experiences of his life. He'd heard horror stories of ninth graders who lurked in the shadows to jump seventh grade guys and take off their pants. He heard the vice principal was an ogre who walked the halls looking for kids who were

causing problems and hated kids like him. The stories were right about some of the details, but they were wrong he says about Miss Evridge.

As he puts it, she cared. None of the other teachers even noticed him, but she did. He admits he was a short, fat, shy kid. In those days he was one of the few kids who didn't have a dad living at home. They were poor, and that poverty reached deep into his heart, making him feel worthless.

In the beginning, he was scared of Miss Evridge.

He had good reason, he says; she was tall, and when she put her hair up in a bun, that must have added another six inches. She seemed like a giant.

She was also strict. Talking in class was not allowed, and she'd shoot a chilling stare at anyone who dared speak. She refused to bend in her rule about tardiness.

"If the bottom portion of your anatomy is not in juxtaposition to the fine wood grain on the fine wood grain on the seat of your chair at the beginning

- I repeat at the beginning - of the ringing of the bell (she paused for dramatic flair), then you will be tardy.

He didn't even know what juxtaposition meant, nor did the other kids, but he realized they had to be in their chairs before the bell rang or he would become fodder for the vice principal.

During the second week of school, he rushed into the classroom just as the tardy bell rang. It wasn't even his fault; some big guys wouldn't let him into his locker to get his book. But Miss Evridge made him get a tardy pass. That convinced him that she was indeed the ogre everyone said she was.

Another reason he feared Miss Evridge was her language. No teacher had ever called the students urchins before. "I'll hang you little urchins by your ears from the ceiling fan and turn it on high 'til the blood rushes to your feet and your toes pop" she said. It sounded at first like torture, but it didn't take him long to realize that she was a comedian.

His fear soon turned to fascination. Her classes were fun. She had a game for every part of speech, an activity for every diagram. No other teacher

had a wheel to spin for questions and prizes. No other class allowed the kids to laugh and learn at the same time. She led the kids in victory over the verbs and conquest of conjunctions. They learned to stand valiantly against the dreaded preposition.

Miss Evridge though was different in another way. She was a Christian teacher in a public school, and she was not afraid to let the kids know.

One student, with a defiant look, hurled a question at her: "What do you think of Jews?"

"I love Jews," she replied calmly. "My Savior was a Jew."

Having gotten more serious about his own faith a year prior, Joe was eager to tell her that he was also a Christian.

Stopping by her desk, he whispered "Jesus is my Savior too."

"I know" she said matter of factly.

“How did you know?” he asked.

“I can just tell” she smiled.

Perhaps it was their common faith that bonded their relationship. Miss Evridge loved all of her students, but Joe sensed she took a special interest in him in particular. No one before had shown any interest in the chubby kid who was too shy to say much, but Miss Evridge did.

“Joe, I have a speech contest I want you to enter,” she informed him one day. Why in the world he wondered would she challenge him to enter a speech contest? He was too timid. But she coaxed him and coached him. She pushed him beyond his limits. And he won. The next year, he won again. The third year, his best friend, Leon beat him. Miss Evridge consoled him, but also warned him against pride.

“Pride got Lucifer kicked out of heaven,” she counseled. “Joe, God may want to use your gift in speaking someday. Perhaps he will call you to be a preacher, but he cannot use you if pride gets in the way.”

“No thank you. I don’t want to be a preacher,” he insisted. “I want to be a scientist.”

“What kind of scientist” she asked.

“I don’t know yet. But my mind is made up. That’s what I’m going to be someday,” he said.

She smiled. He hated it when she smiled that way because it was as if she knew something he didn’t. She encouraged him in his scientific endeavors, but gently reminded him that God might have other ideas.

God indeed, did have other ideas. At the time he wrote his story, he had been a pastor for 17 years, and headed the church ministries department at a Bible college where he tries to prepare other young men for a ministry in preaching. He wished he could tell her that.

He misses her for a lot of reasons. He recalls how she made his 3 years at Daggett Junior High School a wonderful learning experience. When he

graduated, she also left the school to work on her doctorate in another city; he'd never see her again.

What a surprise he writes how one morning when she walked into the grocery store where he worked and convinced his boss to let him off long enough for her to take him to lunch. She probably told him she would flunk him from life if he said no. He doesn't remember what they hate, but the spiritual food she shared nourished his soul.

She couldn't come to his high school graduation because of her graduate work, but she wrote to congratulate him. The day before he left for Bible college, she took him out again and reminded him that God could really use him if he remained a clean vessel. A few years later she was there for his wedding.

Then they lost contact. She was to be married, her new address was on the invitation but he lost it. He's regretted that ever since, but he still has part of her with him - a faded and yellowed piece of paper with a poem from her. It was a note of encouragement when he failed to win the "student service award" at ninth grade graduation.



She wrote:

“If you don’t get an award when you really know you should, Don’t be disappointed, God knows when you are “good.”

It isn’t always the best man who is honored here below, because people give teh awards, and there’s so much they don’t know.

So when you fail or think that you have had tremendous loss, Remember our Savior was perfect and his reward was a cross.

And remember, my friend, as you travel through life with all its strive and sin,

That as long as you please Christ, you’re the fellow who will win!”

He hopes to see her again before Heaven. He just wants to her to know that those years she spent as a junior high school teacher were not spent in vain. She touched his life and molded him to be more useful for God’s

kingdom. So, with all of his heart, he says he has to say “Thank you, Miss Evridge, wherever you are.”

Miss Evridge may have been a junior high teacher, but at a deeper level she was a disciple; a follower of Christ who lived out her faith. And such is the call for all of us. Like the disciples we are sent; the Church is a field hospital and we are sent to be people of hope and be true fishers of men. Our readings to start the year have really focused on that, and this week is no exception, as Jesus shows us what discipleship and ministry are all about; and these include growing closer to God ourselves through prayer, assisting and caring for the poor, and then spreading the Gospel through our words and actions.

At first, we are told Jesus rises before dawn and goes to a deserted place where he prays. Jesus prays a lot; coming up in a couple of weeks in Lent we'll reflect on Him going into the desert, and then of course He prays in the Garden of Gethsemane before the Passion. Jesus is always connected to the Father, the love between them being perfect with the Holy Spirit the outflowing of that love. For us, prayer allows us to have a spiritually full tank. Physically, I know if I don't get exercise in every day I'm sluggish and

not really myself; spiritually the same is true with prayer. Prayer allows me to reflect, to listen to the voice of God, to contemplate what I need to do better, to seek God's help and mercy. Mass is the perfect prayer, which is why it's so important we are here to reflect on the Word of God but also to receive our Lord in the Eucharist. The thing with prayer is it can be easy to let it go just like exercise for our bodies; we get busy with work, hobbies, sports schedules, so many things. But when we pray, we get that insight into looking at our lives and how we are doing, and reconnect with God and most importantly get that boost knowing we are loved and that God is with us through the good times and the challenging times . Prayer keeps our eyes fixed on God and reminds us of our ultimate destination, which isn't a bigger office or house or bank account but heaven, so make it a priority and use what works; maybe you pray in the car, on the treadmill, on a walk, maybe you slowly read the Bible or use an app like Hallow, maybe you meditate. And remember with Mass, it's not about entertainment though we try to augment and help worship, it's about you encountering God; so I always tell folks it's normal to get distracted (I do!) but just refocus and think about God's love for you which is why you are at Mass. Joe didn't talk about Miss Evridge's prayer life, but it's obvious that she was a woman of prayer so she could go in and teach every day and live out her faith.

Second, we help the sick and the poor. Jesus cures the Mother in Law of Peter, and we are told all who are sick and hurting then come up to be helped by Jesus. Certainly we help the materially poor through mission trips, volunteering to help the needy and less fortunate at homeless shelters. Even just giving the gift of one's time to be with someone who is sick or dealing with a hard situation in life can do so much.

But third, with this are the spiritually poor too; and this is evangelization. Miss Evridge saw a group of kids who had gifts, and she used her abilities to get them to love learning, but to help them more deeply. She helped kids find their gifts, but she also lived out her faith, unafraid to speak about what she believed. Now she wasn't a religion teacher as this was a public school, but what strikes me with her story is it's a perfect example of what evangelization looks like for most of us. Note the words of Paul in our second reading: "If I preach the gospel, this is no reason for me to boast, for an obligation has been imposed on me, and woe to me if I do not preach it!" Paul will go all over preaching and have all kinds of challenges; and he knows it will be a challenge. Jesus does the work of helping people, but then they leave, going to the nearby towns to evangelize. We too are

sent, like Miss Evridge, into our daily lives. And now more than ever we can't be afraid to preach the Gospel through words and actions. But we have to do so creatively like Miss Evridge. We know our audience; Saint Francis Xavier for instance went to India and lived in austerity like the people there; Fr. Matteo Ricci, the missionary to China, dressed elegantly for that is what teachers and religious people did at the time in China. Miss Evridge got to know her student's stories as individuals and it's what helped her reach people like Joe who indeed became a minister in part because of her. So how do we preach? By not being afraid, but also by being patient. Through journeying with people, knowing what they go through in their lives and a bit about their past. Through talking their language, and recognizing it takes being creative, a bit of prodding, and knowing how people are unique. Paul says it best: "I have made myself a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible. To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all, to save at least some." As we do this, we'll face indifference, some pushback, and maybe people will at times label us. But we'll also get people to think like Miss Evridge did, and help people to discover God in their lives.

Yesterday we celebrated the Presentation of the Lord; it's also called Candlemas, the day in which candles were blessed for use in homes,

which were important when there was no electricity. People brought candles into the church and then left with them; and at a deeper level, the feast reminds us of how our light needs to shine before others. You and I are the lights, because in the world there are so many people like Joe; describing himself at age 13 as this scared sometimes dejected kid who just needed a little help to see his gifts and a reminder of God's plans for him. Like Virgil and then Beatrice, who were Dante's guides to heaven in *The Divine Comedy*, so must we be to the world. Woe to us if we do not preach the Gospel. May we take our obligation seriously, and in so doing win souls for heaven.