

“And the people stood by, watching”
Reading from the Old Testament: Jeremiah 23:1-6
Reading from the Gospels: Luke 23:33-43

Among the more evocative paintings of renowned artist, Norman Rockwell is entitled, *The Problem We All Live With*. Its subject is not the idealized America represented in many of Rockwell’s paintings, but rather the bleaker side of a nation absorbed in perpetuating the exact opposite of the expressed ideals of *United We Stand* and *One Nation Under God*. The portrait’s primary subject is not a fictionalized character, but a flesh and blood first-grader who just wants to go to school.

But children like Ruby Bridges did not go to William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, because Ruby was black and schools in the state of Louisiana had for years resisted the landmark Supreme Court decision in the case of *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. Bowing to a federal court order in 1960, a small number of black students were allowed to enroll in previously all-white schools.

And so in November of that year, Ruby, 6 years old, dressed in her neatly pressed Sunday best and escorted by federal marshals, climbed the steps of Frantz Elementary amidst the shouted epithets and jeers of enraged

parents and hostile segregationists. Yet, though tiny in stature, Ruby stood tall and innocent, rising to the moment with incomparable grace. She would spend the year as a class of one, there being no parents allowing their children to abide Ruby's presence, and only one teacher willing to associate with her. Nevertheless, she persisted. She had perfect attendance. The verbal abuse and malicious reactions would continue. Her father's job disappeared. The grocery store refused to sell to her mother. Nevertheless, Ruby kept walking to school.

For his painting, Rockwell chose to depict Ruby in a white dress against the stark backdrop of a wall spray-painted with a racial obscenity and stained from the detritus of a thrown tomato. Flanked by suited federal agents with their heads out of view to emphasize the paradox of such a tiny titan, Ruby walks with a notebook, a ruler, and a carriage of innocent dignity.

An actual photo of Ruby leaving school with similarly suited federal marshals offers an even more stark contrast of grace and goodness in the midst of hostility. Accessorized with bows on her Mary Janes, on her dress, and in her hair, and carrying a satchel, much like an attorney leaving the

courthouse, Ruby was the essence of Beauty towering over the Beasts. In the jeers of the mob looking upon her innocence with venomous disgust, one can almost hear the demons confronting Jesus, “I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” For in that moment, Ruby certainly was.

Pastor and editor Peter Marty relates that the noted psychiatrist, Robert Coles, was at that time researching children involved in desegregating the schools of the South, and he would meet with Ruby on a weekly basis. “One day Ruby’s teacher told Coles that she had noticed Ruby moving her lips as she was walking into school. So Coles asked her, ‘Who were you talking to, Ruby?’ ‘I was talking to God and praying for the people in the street,’ she said. ‘Why were you doing that, Ruby?’ ‘Well, because I wanted to pray for them. Don’t you think they need praying for?’

Coles responded affirmatively but pushed further. ‘Where did you learn that?’ ‘From my mommy and daddy and from the minister at church. I pray every morning [when I come to school] and every afternoon when I go home.’ Coles continued, ‘But Ruby, those people are so mean to you. You must have some other feelings besides just wanting to pray for them.’ ‘No,’ she said, ‘I just keep praying for them and hope God will be good to

them. . . . I always pray the same thing. ‘Please, dear God, forgive them, because they don’t know what they’re doing.’” (Peter Marty, *The Christian Century*)

Tim O’Brien, one of the finest singer/songwriters around, wrote a tribute song to the late congressman and civil rights icon, John Lewis, and the lyrics, so descriptive of Lewis’ words and life witness, are also redolent of that precious angel of God, Ruby Bridges. The chorus says, “When you pray, move your feet. Bring his love to the people you meet. Get out the chair, walk the street. When you pray, move your feet.” Ruby did, because Jesus did. What about you?

Luke’s description of Jesus’ Passion offers this detail beginning with the verse preceding our text today: “Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals.”

Led away. Put to death. Crucified. At first glance it would appear that Jesus is but a passive character in the sadistic drama, and in a purely temporal sense he was, suffering the inevitable consequences of those who in love confront us with an unwelcome truth about ourselves. We deny,

deflect, blame the messenger, and seek to vanquish both messenger and message.

Ruby Bridges, without a word, confronted society with the ugliest of truths about us – our prejudice, our cruelty, our hate – and so the society around her sought to destroy her spirit, even going so far as shoving before Ruby an open child’s casket with a black doll inside. Again, one could look upon the scene, and as with Jesus, it could be said that she was entirely acted upon, subject to forces over which she held no sway.

Speaking of a suffering servant, the prophet Isaiah reports, “despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.”

Above Jesus’ head on the cross was nailed a placard declaring his crime according to Roman authorities: King of the Jews. Yet, the very people whose fears and paranoia and rage eventuated in Jesus’ crucifixion, were exasperated that this supposed king was apparently responding in a way that was the exact opposite of the practices of earthly powers and

principalities. As Isaiah said, “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”

That’s not the way power works in our world. The powerful do not relinquish power without a fight. Look at the playbook of the autocrat: Centralize power; repress dissent and protest; control the content and flow of information; ignore truth; use violence and intimidation without respect for life.

That’s how power works in this world and Jesus represented nothing of that ... and that drove his opponents to distraction. “The leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God.” “The soldiers also mocked him ... saying, ‘If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself!’” “One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’” That’s the way power works in our world - take it; use it to your advantage regardless of the cost others may suffer; destroy those who oppose you.

Led away. Put to death. Crucified. Innocent? Acted upon? Yes. Unjustly victimized by outside forces? Yes. But passive? Absolutely not. To

be clear, it's not that Jesus directed the drama of his Passion, seeking it out, and planning it, manipulating characters and events to fit a script. Christ's purpose, his driving force, his intention, his mission statement was to do what love commands. Jesus wasn't pursuing power, because Jesus already had it. Jesus' superpower was love, and there was nothing passive about it.

You see, it's not that Jesus had the power to act and didn't. It's that Jesus had the power to act and did ... just not in the way we would expect here on earth; just not with the hubris, corruption, coercion, fraud, self-indulgence, and indifference to suffering that regularly characterize the use of power all around us. Jesus used his power in pursuit of what love demands, self-giving instead of self-seeking.

Taught by the faith of her parents and her church, that is what Ruby Bridges pursued. “But Ruby, those people are so mean to you. You must have some other feelings besides just wanting to pray for them.’ ‘No,’ she said, ‘I just keep praying for them and hope God will be good to them. . . . I always pray the same thing. ‘Please, dear God, forgive them, because they don't know what they're doing.’”

Whose actions does history record as righteous? The mob or a six-year old in a Sunday dress with the strength of a mighty oak? The angry mob or the love of God enfleshed in a carpenter from Nazareth? Whose power draws us here? Voices as diverse as Gandhi and Jimi Hendrix have said, “When the power of love overcomes the love of power the world will know peace.” And let us be clear, there is nothing passive about love.

There is an open question in the text that challenges the church and the people of God. We see the actions of the mighty Roman Empire. We see the actions of the religious leaders. We see the extent humans will go to preserve power. We see the powerful actions of one who picked up a cross in the name of love. But Luke includes a note about another group found at the scene. As the executioners gambled for his last earthly possession with Jesus agonizing on the cross above them, Luke observes, “And the people stood by, watching...” Hmmm ... what will we do? Will we stand by, watching, or will we pursue what love demands? In spite of the chaos all around them, Jesus chose love ... Ruby chose love. What will we do?

Our dear friend and colleague, Rebecca Guzman, whose ministry feeds us and nourishes us with the light of Christ, well ... she did not get much

sleep Thursday into Friday, a week ago. For that matter, neither did Rafael or Clara. Late in the dark of evening, there was a devastating fire in the house next door. Left forgotten on the front porch, the neighbors having gone inside for the night, was a burning candle. The wind had turned over the candle without extinguishing the flame. Within 10 minutes the entire central portion of the house would be engulfed in flames, its windows exploding in the heat. And were it not for two serendipitous and simultaneous events, what was undoubtedly devastating would have turned tragic.

The family upstairs had no idea what was evolving on the first floor of their house. However, in those early moments, it just so happened that next door Rafael, being a dutiful husband and father, was taking out the trash when he saw an unusual amount of fire and smoke billowing on the neighbors front porch. In that same moment, three teenage boys in a pickup, doing whatever it is teenage boys in a pickup would be doing after dark, came careening around the corner.

Yet, seeing simultaneously what Rafael was just then seeing, the driver slammed on his brakes and the three teens jumped out, and jumping over

the flames, ran directly into the house, rousing the family upstairs and getting them out the back of the house. At the same time, Rafael was dialing 911, repeating over and over, yes, it was a house, and yes, it was the house that was on fire. Almost immediately, Rebecca, not stopping for shoes, was on the scene in her fuzzy socks, being .. well ... being Rebecca, taking charge and making sure everyone was safe. And don't you know that by morning, Rebecca had a spreadsheet with a list to help a shocked-to-numbness mom find her first steps back into life.

Three teenage boys, as if the Wise Men careened into Bethlehem in a pickup bearing gifts of life preservation. A dutiful dad on trash duty. And, of course, our colleague, the most organized and intentional nurturer this side of the Holy Land. They could have turned away, they could have driven off, they could have said, "Not my fire, not my problem." They chose to face the chaos and pursue what love demands.

"The people stood by, watching." That just won't do, will it? As the late congressman John Lewis modeled for us, as Ruby demonstrated for us, and as Tim O'Brien sang for us. "When you pray, move your feet." Amen.