

## Ruby Bridging the World

July 28, 2019

Luke 9:51-62

Let me set the scene for you. The place was New Orleans, LA. The year was 1960. Six years earlier, the Supreme Court ruled in “Brown v. Board of Education” that schools should not be segregated and that everyone deserves a fair education. Enter now Ruby Bridges, a young Black girl who, at this point, was only in the first grade, who was exceptionally smart and was given the opportunity to be one of the first children in the nation to desegregate schools. For a while, she was the only child in the school. She had to be escorted to and from the school by U.S. Deputy Marshalls for her safety. When she went to and from school, Ruby Bridges faced derogatory names, death threats, and teachers that didn’t want to teach her. When students did return, she faced fellow students who didn’t want to include her in games and such. At home, she and her family faced retaliation from fellow Black folk who felt the effects of this event in their businesses, in increased presence of law enforcement in the neighborhood, and in increased tension between White and Black people.

Amidst all of this opposition, an opposition she didn’t understand as a six-year-old, she stood strong. As she walked to and from school each day, she prayed. She said, “Please God, forgive these people, because even if they say those mean things, they don’t know what they’re doing. So, you can forgive them, just like you did those folks a long time ago when they said terrible things about you.” These are powerful words from the mouth of a child, words that, almost 60 years later, still strike a powerful chord and hold a powerful message. These are words that I’m sure Ruby is not the only person to say. While Ruby may not have physically led people to change at the age of six, she remains a perfect example of what it is Jesus is talking about today. She stood by what the Bible teaches. She stood against the powers that be that dictate otherwise.

What I mean by that is that, in our world, there are two powers. In one corner is the power of God, which tells us what to do, how to think, how to speak, and who we are to include/exclude. In the other corner is the power of Society and its norms, which also tells us what to do, how to think, how to speak, and who we are to include/exclude. Our challenge as humans is to distinguish which rule/law comes from which power, and to determine if it furthers God’s plan for this world. For example, the White people in the angry mobs, they’re portrayed in photos, videos, books, and movies about what Ruby Bridges did as monsters filled with nothing but hate and fear. They made death threats and hurled hateful speech against a child who didn’t know what was going on. These same folk would then attend church and nod in agreement when told the story of the Good Samaritan, thinking, “Yes, we must love each other, no matter who they are.” What they didn’t know though is that the power of society was putting an asterisk next to the word “neighbor” in their minds.

In the story today, people ask to follow Jesus, but to first be allowed to say good-bye to family or bury a loved one. Jesus turns them away because of their conditions for following him. Imagine a sign for a church that read “Inclusive towards those with a net worth greater than \$100K.” That’s not very inclusive, is it? The point that is being driven at with this reading is a conflict between doing that which furthers God’s work and doing what the other powers dictate we should do.

This is a struggle we all must contend with: to follow God or to follow societal norms. If we follow the norms of today, we remain (to a certain extent) content, at peace, and comfortable.

That is to say that we know what any given day holds, there is a certain rhythm. However, those things we see as needing to change won't get change, because no one's taking a stand. If we follow God, we have not guarantee of contentment, peace, or comfort. We have to know that God's desires may take us across lines we never thought to cross before, that they may take us out of our comfort zone. As one commentary put it:

There is a kind of disorienting sense of itinerancy when one steps out of the comfort of one's own group, whether that group is a particular socioeconomic group, a racial or ethnic group, a gendered group, a religious group, a national group, to engage in what might be perceived as a frightening member of another group. Members of one's own group may reject you; members of the other group might reject you. Jesus insists that the risk is necessary for the work of the kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

When we do cross those lines, there will be many who tell you what you can/cannot do. They'll tell you you're too old/young. They'll tell you you're too liberal/conservative. They'll tell you you're not welcome for some other reason. As a people, though, we need to stop listening to what society dictates we can/cannot do and listen to what God is telling us to do:

- To love all neighbors, regardless of who they are or what they look like, equally
- To forgive as we have been forgiven
- To share our gifts
- To support one another in our times of trials
- To look at those barriers between groups not as a sign two groups shouldn't mingle, but as a possible spot for a bridge.

Our world is one full of chasms in need of crossing and bridging:

- Gender issues
- Race issues
- Religious issues
- Political issues

Therefore, I invite you to ask yourself: What bridges will you build?

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<sup>1</sup> *Connections*, Year C, vol. III. Pg. 123.