

The Authority of Rosa Parks
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
January 28, 2024

Reflection on the Theme by Ronnie Mars

Hanging up in my bedroom was a poster of a black boy sitting in his bedroom. He looked to be about five years old, dressed in a striped t-shirt, a pair of dungarees, and sneakers. Next to him appeared to be schoolbooks on a desk with a table lamp. Mounted over the desk was a bookshelf containing other books and a baseball glove. In the corner behind him sat his bed. The uniqueness of this poster was that everything surrounding the boy was devoid of color.

His chair, the bookshelf and books, the baseball glove, the desk, the lamp, the bed and its bedding, the overhead light fixture, and the light switches were all opposite of his color, including the walls and floor. Except for the boy's skin color and outfit, everything in the room was white.

I was fifteen when US Senator and Democratic presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King met his fate that April. Riots took place in Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Chicago, and Kansas City, which swept across the United States following the assassination lasting nearly two months.

I was attending summer school, making up for the science class I failed that spring. The Vietnam conflict was raging on, with protests against the war happening in cities and on college campuses across the country. The little black boy in the poster spoke directly to me. He could have been me.

I was almost three when, on December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks helped initiate the civil rights movement in the United States when she refused to give up her seat to a white man on a city bus. Her actions inspired the leaders of the local black community to organize the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Parks became a nationally recognized symbol of dignity and strength in the struggle to end entrenched racial segregation.

When six-year-old Ruby Bridges entered an all-white elementary school escorted by Federal Marshals in 1960, I was seven years old. This escort continued all year. Ruby was the first African American child to attend the formerly white-only William Frantz Elementary School in Louisiana during the New Orleans school desegregation crisis on November 14 of that year.

When Ruby's teacher Barbara Henry asked if her newly hired teaching job was in a school that would be integrated, the superintendent replied, "Would that make any difference to you?" She said no. Only she was willing to teach Bridges, and for more than a year, Mrs. Henry taught her alone, "as if she were teaching a whole class.

It was not unusual to be followed and watched by salespeople when my mother and I shopped for school clothes in the department store. Before the Civil Rights Act of 1968, the black kids had to enter the movie theater through the side entrance, leading my friends and me to the balcony, separating us from the white kids sitting down below during a matinee. My sister said she never understood why we could buy our snacks and beverages from the same concession stand but had to sit in the mezzanine. I said, it's because our money was green.

When I was the age of the little black boy in the poster, the White Supremacist hate group Ku Klux Klan burned crosses at night in a wooded area across from our Public Housing. Those are memories I will always have; flashbacks I can never forget. Had it not been for Rosa, Martin, Bobby, Ruby, and countless others, I'm hesitant to imagine my reality today.

Let's picture the little boy today, he sits still as if suspended in time but look! His seat is a mahogany oak chair on a walnut hardwood floor. A maple bookshelf is above a cherry desk with beginning reading books and a brass lamp. Propped against a set of "Dr. Seuss" books, is a ruddy tan baseball glove. Race car designs adorn the bedspread and pillowcases. Spaceships and astronaut images cover the walls under a copper ceiling light fixture. Only the ceiling remains white. With yet unfulfilled promises; to borrow a line from the writer Rod Serling, "So long as there are children, there are possibilities."

***The Authority of Rosa Parks*© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

Twentieth century theologian and civil rights activist, Howard Thurman, offered this interpretation of *Wade in the Water* (that the choir just sang):

"For [the slaves] the 'troubled waters' meant the ups and downs, the vicissitudes of life. Within the context of the 'troubled' waters of life there are healing waters, because God is in the midst of the turmoil."

These African American spirituals such as *Wade in the Water*, *this Little Light of Mine*, and *Let My People Go* were born in the pain, oppression and struggle of a particular people, though their message is universal and speaks to all. Thurman wrote,

"Do not shrink from moving confidently out into the choppy seas. Wade in the water, because God is troubling the water."

I've always wondered why God would trouble the water – thinking that the troubling waters were problems that God intentionally put in our way, when, as I understand it now, this "troubling" that God does to the water is a bubbling presence, mystical waves which indicate the presence of angels or God, and that the water, once troubled in this way, provides healing, both physical and spiritual. God is in the midst of the troubles, as Thurman wrote.

And of course, this song was sung as a message to those people escaping slavery, by Harriet Tubman, who was, not incidentally, referred to as Moses. She was sending a coded message with the song, that if you get in the water, the dogs of the slave catchers won't be able to catch your scent and find you...

Moses said, both the original Moses and the Moses named Harriet, "Pharaoh, you are on the side of slavery but the universe is on the side of justice." God is on the side of justice.

Ain't gonna let no Pharaoh turn me around, the lyrics got changed to "*ain't gonna let Bull Conner turn me around*" – referring to the Birmingham Commissioner of Public Safety who sent the dogs and firehouses on the protestors in 1963, nearly a decade after Mrs. Rosa Parks was first arrested.

Our theme for this month of January has been "authority" and authority is about power.

The reason it's a difficult topic has to do with how power has been and is misused to oppress rather than liberate people. We think of the Pharaoh and Bull Connor rather than Moses, Harriet Tubman, or Rosa Parks. Of course it's not just individuals, but institutions – churches or governments that can abuse power or be a force for liberation, and of course, generally, not either/or but a little bit of both/and.

The book that John read from, *the Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, opens with the death of Rosa Parks and the national tribute meant to honor her that actually downplays her role in the civil rights movement, reducing it to a single moment in 1955 when she refused to give up her seat on that bus. “Instead of using the opportunity to illuminate and address current social inequity,” wrote Theoharis, “the public spectacle provided an opportunity for the nation to lay to rest a national heroine and its own history of racism.”

No wonder people were shocked at the protests of 2020 after the murder of George Floyd because many people – many white people – in this nation had laid to rest its history of racism. Racism was something that happened in the South in the last century. We celebrated Rosa Parks in 2005 and elected Barack Obama in 2008. Surely we had overcome racism.

Isabel Wilkerson compares this country of America to an old house and wrote in 2020 that “when you live in an old house, you may not want to go into the basement after a storm to see what the rains have wrought. Choose not to look, however, at your own peril. The owner of an old house knows that whatever you are ignoring will never go away. Whatever is lurking will fester whether you choose to look or not. Ignorance is no protection from the consequences of inaction.”

That metaphor was from her 2020 book, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. It helped many of us who may have believed the narrative that racism was “over” in America see what it was we didn't wish to see. To go look in the basement. A decade before *Caste* Wilkerson had written *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* which tells an exodus story – nearly six million black people who fled the South for northern and western cities in search of a better life.

Mrs. Rosa Parks was one of those people. She had endured death threats, cross-burnings, red-baiting, poverty and illness following her arrest. She left Montgomery for Detroit, to live in the North, “the promised land that wasn't” – for racism is and always was a national problem, not a southern one. And yet throughout her life, before and after her arrest, she was an activist. She opposed segregation in the South and in the North. She cultivated independent black power, taught black history, challenged police brutality and government persecution and opposed US involvement in Vietnam.

Though society did not give Mrs. Rosa Parks much power - even the civil rights movement didn't give Mrs. Rosa Parks much power or credit - she had power. She had the power of conviction and personal authority. She knew the injustices that surrounded her and others and worked tirelessly to end them. She trained – she attended the Highlander Folk School on implementing school desegregation, just before her first arrest. Highlander was and is a social justice leadership training school and cultural center. Parks was committed to youth empowerment and education. In 1987 the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute of Self-development was established to offer job training for black youth. She remained an active member of the NAACP – and in her leadership of chapters kept them focused on social justice and activism. She worked for Congressman John Conyers helping the homeless find housing.

Last week, in a sermon about finding our center – with the metaphor of tying a rope to the barn in a blizzard- I mentioned how connected Rosa Parks was to others in the movement for civil rights and how much preparation she had for her moment in the spotlight. That first arrest was both planned and spontaneous.

She was ready, but didn't know when exactly she'd be asked to move to make room for a white person to sit down – but she had planned and prepared for that moment. With those two things – her connections to others and her preparation – she used the fullness of her authority – the fullness of her being with the certainty that she was enough and she was needed – to make history.

Her story causes me to reflect on my own connections and my own preparations, and to ask you about yours. I wonder about the connections and preparations of Moses and Harriet Tubman, of Ruby Bridges and Barbara Henry.

What is it that they knew to be true and how were they connected to those values and others with those shared values? What is it in the center of your being that you know to be true, and how are you connected to those values and others with those values? How are you preparing yourself to act when the opportunity arises? *Hush, hush, is somebody calling your name?*

“There is something in everyone one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself” wrote Howard Thurman. “It is the only true guide you will ever have. And, if you cannot hear it, you will - all your life - spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.”

“The question is not whether we will be extremists,” said Dr. King, “but what kind of extremists will we be? Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?”

“God, please trouble our water” – Howard Thurman again - “and give us the courage to move confidently out into those choppy seas.”