

When Ruby Bridges prayed for her enemies

In the face of mob violence, a six-year-old responded with love.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [March 29, 2017](#) issue



U.S. marshals escorting Ruby Bridges to school in 1960.

Fifty-six years have passed since six-year-old Ruby Bridges walked into William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans. Ruby was black; the other students were white. Her walk into that school, surrounded by federal marshals (later immortalized in Norman Rockwell's painting *The Problem We All Live With*), signaled a major development in desegregation. Before her first day of first grade had ended, parents

had emptied the school of white children in a massive boycott. Ruby learned alone that year, taught by the one teacher willing to remain.

Huge crowds of protesters gathered daily outside the school to shout slurs and death threats at Ruby. Film clips from the day are hauntingly difficult to watch. Throngs of angry whites waved Confederate flags, and some even shoved before Ruby an open child's casket with a black doll inside. These expressions of public hatred remind us how unrestrained fear can quickly spiral into mob mentality.

When psychiatrist Robert Coles was studying children in the desegregating South in the '60s, he took a personal interest in Ruby. Her display of strength, stoicism, and bright cheer in the midst of a daily hell caught his attention and puzzled him. He began to meet with her every week.

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.'"

Two quick impressions arise from that little exchange. First, we notice the beautiful witness of a six-year-old girl with biblical truths embedded deep in her character. From parents who could neither read nor write, Ruby absorbed scripture that the family had memorized in church and exercised at home. She discovered through her parents' poverty and humility how to put those truths into practice. I wonder how many of us with fancy degrees and affluent households come close to an equivalent life so thoroughly grounded in God.

Second, her choice of prayer language points to love being at the heart of forgiveness. Jesus' remarkable words from the cross constitute pure love doled out to people who had insulted him and become enmeshed in fear of each other.

Perhaps this Holy Week we ought to pray those Jesus words ourselves, speaking them with the confident spirit of Ruby Bridges: “Please, dear God, forgive us, because we often don’t know what we’re doing.”

A version of this article appears in the March 29 print edition under the title “A child leads.”