

**“A Boldness  
Not Our Own”**

**Sunday, June 21, 2009**

Rev. Leah Robberts-Mosser

---

*145 Capital Ave., NE  
Battle Creek, MI 49017  
269-965-1225  
[www.fccb.org](http://www.fccb.org)*

**A Boldness Not Our Own**  
**Pastor Leah Robberts-Mosser**  
**June 21, 2009**

Scripture Reading: Acts 2:5-11

In our story from Acts, Peter and John are in big trouble and if they don't stop doing what they are doing, they are going to end up in jail, or worse. But, because they know the way of liberating King Jesus, and because they are filled with the Holy Spirit (they say, "We are unable to restrain ourselves from speaking") and, because they have the support of the community, the religious leaders don't throw them in jail. The religious leaders change their minds and kowtow to public opinion.

That is the perfect recipe for boldness not our own: When we know the way of the liberating King Jesus the Christ (when we know it in our bones, when it is a part of us), when we are fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit, and when we have the support of the community (so we know if we take a step we aren't going to fall because they are going to catch us), then we are able to act in bold and amazing ways. That is what we are going to explore today, a boldness not our own. So, as we prepare for The Word Preached, would you join your hearts and minds with me in prayer:

*O, God, May the words of my mouth and meditations of each of our hearts be found acceptable in your site for you are our rock and our redeemer. Amen*

Usually when I hear the story of Rosa Parks, I hear it told like this: Rosa Parks was a seamstress living in Montgomery, Alabama. One day when she got on a bus to go to work, she was just sick and tired of having to get up and move to the back of the bus so that white people could have a seat, that she just decided to stay seated. That's what prompted the Montgomery bus boycott, and that sparked the civil rights movement, and that moment changed the world.

All of that is true, but it is not the whole story; it is not the whole story at all. We find when we look at Rosa Parks' story, the same recipe for "a boldness not our own" that was outlined in the Acts story today. Rosa Parks knew the way of the liberating King Jesus the Christ so well (she knew it in her bones), she felt empowered by the Holy Spirit and she was supported by a faith community. Let's look at each of those three pieces, starting with knowing the way of Jesus.

Rosa Parks was a life-long member of the African American Episcopal Church; she read her bible every day. She said that there was a peace that came over her when she read her bible. She knew the stories of Jesus. She knew that the struggle for equality in this world is the same as God's vision of greater justice and mercy for this world. She understood that. Because she was a member of a church, she was part of a supportive community. She was supported by that community, just as we are all supported by this, our faith community. And that was not the only community she was part of; she and her husband were very, very active in the NAACP.

Rosa Parks had also attended the Highland Folk School where she had been trained in racial equality and workers' rights, so that if, one day, she did decide to do an act of civil disobedience, she would be able to do it in a way that would matter – in a way that wouldn't be a futile action, but in a way that would be the bedrock for further actions.

And that wasn't the way that Claudette Colvin had done it. Claudette Colvin – does anybody know who Claudette Colvin is? Claudette Colvin was an African-American teenager who, nine whole months before Rosa Parks remained seated on the bus, did the very same thing. Now Claudette had not gone to Highland Folk School. She did not know how to do an act of civil disobedience in a way that could be the bedrock of a movement. Instead, one day when getting on the bus with her friends, she really had had it up to here with having to move to the back of the bus. So when the white people got on the bus and the bus driver told her she had to go to the back of the bus, she remained seated out of righteous indignation fueled by the Holy Spirit because she knew she was worth more than somebody who had to go to the back of the bus. She stayed in her seat! The police dragged her off of the bus; she was charged with a whole laundry list of charges.

Leaders of the NAACP looked at this situation and realized that because she was a teenager and because she had a little bit of a reputation of being a wild child, they didn't think that they were going to be able to mount a movement on what Claudette

had done. They didn't "hang her out to dry", however. The community did not desert her; instead, they surrounded her and asked a particular advisor to the NAACP Youth Group to take Claudette under her wing – and that person was Rosa Parks. So, when Parks decided to remain seated, she had the sense of community beyond just her; she knew what her young friend had done; she knew that she had this network supporting her; she knew that what she was doing was bringing about the good news of Jesus in a very real way in Montgomery and she felt a presence, like a quilt, come and cover her body; she was wrapped in the Holy Spirit. With those three things, she was able to act in a boldness not her own.

The folks that you saw up here reading the scripture earlier are part of a worship team -- we have met several times over the past few weeks to plan worship for last Wednesday. When we started talking about this boldness not our own, we started telling stories left and right; we were talking about Rosa Parks, and Lech Walesa, and this girl in California who knew that they were going to put a huge sewer pipe down through the middle of her community -- she rallied her community and stopped that from happening.

We heard this story from Julie Jackson, a member here at FCC - when she was a young married woman with a few kids going to Jackson Community College, she made the Dean's List. When she went to look, she saw that her name was not there. When she asked why her name was not there - be-

cause she was told, “Well dear, we never put married female students’ names on the Dean’s List.”

That’s when Julie and several of her friends - other women whose names were supposed to be on the Dean’s List - decided they would go down and sit there until the college administrators changed their minds. At first they just thought these were silly girls. But after eight hours they knew that these women weren’t joking. After eight hours the school changed their mind and issued them an apology and changed the policy. Because of Julie and her friends, if you go to Jackson Community College and you make the Dean’s List, your name is going to be there. That’s “a boldness not her own”. That’s changing the world; those are the kind of stories we started telling this past week and it was so incredibly exciting that everyday ordinary people could change the world.

Then someone from the group said, “I have to tell you -- this kind of story doesn’t really inspire me. This kind of stories scares me. Even if I knew the way of Jesus, which I do, even if I felt the presence of the Holy Spirit, which I often do, and even if I felt the support of the community, which I do, there is no way I would ever do any of those things. It’s just not who I am.” That is when we have to remind ourselves that there is a variety of gifts that the same Spirit gives us. Not everyone is called to stand up and make speeches. We are each called to do our part in the way in which we are called and gifted to do it.

Back to Rosa Parks’ story – she was arrested on a

Thursday. Then NAACP decided that on Sunday they would have a town hall meeting to call the African-American community together asking them to boycott the bus system.

On Saturday night, the woman's leadership team got together and printed, on a mimeograph machine, 35,000 handbills advertising this meeting. You remember the mimeograph machines -- ka-chunk, ka-chunk, ka-chunk - 35,000 times standing there -- ka-chunk, ka-chunk, ka-chunk -- cranking that handle -- ka-chunk, ka-chunk, ka-chunk. I would think after a few hundred times you would *need* the Holy Spirit to help you finish that job. That is boldness and a lot of bicep. It takes boldness to stay up all night and run 35,000 copies on a mimeograph machine.

But that is not all.

The NAACP knew that in order for the bus boycott to work, the 40,000 African American workers in Montgomery would have to have a way to get to work. They couldn't just not take the bus and sit at home, because then they would be fired. They would lose their jobs and they would have a bigger crisis on their hands. So, the cab drivers of Montgomery got together and decided, "We will do this -- we will make our rates the same as the bus rates. Instead of charging 40 cents per ride, we will only charge 0 cents per ride, making it possible for anybody who participates in the bus boycott to make it to work on time and still be able to go to the store and not lose money doing it."

That is boldness -- to be a business owner who de-

cides to change the way that they do business in order to support their community. That is **boldness**. And it is bold when you, as a consumer, decide to support that business which is supporting the community. Each little piece matters. There is a variety of gifts but the same Spirit gives them, and all of those gifts work together in “a boldness not our own” – and as a result we change the world toward God’s greater justice and mercy.

That raises one last question.

What do we do when all of our actions seem for naught and this outcome that we have been headed towards is not achieved? What do we do?

There is a paper weight that I have seen that says, “What would you do if you knew you couldn’t fail?” Well, I would do *everything* if I knew I couldn’t fail. That’s a silly question. The better question is, “What would we do anyway, even if we knew that it was possible to fail?” We may see *this* particular outcome, but God knows that there are *these* many outcomes. I want to tell you a story about that, too.

When Mr. Leffert was hired as our high school choir director, we knew he was good, and we knew he was good because the freshman girls’ chorus, which used to sound absolutely atrocious, suddenly sounded amazing. That’s how we knew he was good! The freshman girls’ chorus was the litmus test. He was also really gifted in the theater; we put on plays and musicals that were awesome, really awesome! In my senior year we did “Joseph and the Technicolor

Dreamcoat.” It was outstanding. People in town still talk about that – they really do. It was that outstanding. That is why we could not understand why in the spring of my senior year the School Board told Mr. Leffert that he would not be coming back in the fall. We could just not understand why they were going to fire him - until the truth started to creep out.

There in my tiny little southern Indiana town, some parents had found out that Mr. Leffert was gay and they just couldn’t fathom having a gay man teaching their children. So they talked to the School Board, and the School Board decided they needed to keep these parents happy. Suddenly all of those glowing reports he had gotten weren’t so glowing any more and competency reviews which were always stellar, weren’t stellar anymore so they could have some justified reason to let him go.

My friends and I couldn’t believe it was happening. We decided we just couldn’t sit there and let it happen. We decided to do something about it. We had a petition and asked all of our friends to sign it; we asked people who weren’t our friends to sign it – we asked everybody to sign our petition. We had meetings, we - sixteen and seventeen-year-old kids - called meetings with the teachers’ union and with the administration and decided to write a

statement that would be read at the board meeting. I was chosen to read that.

The morning of the school board meeting our Assistant Principal, Mr. Jesse - whom I adored (he had sponsored me on a Teens Encounter Christ retreat) called me into his office that morning and said to me, "Leah, I know that you are a good Christian girl and I know that you don't really want to do this and participate in this." That would be the afternoon that my dad, who also taught at the high school and even though he knew he was putting his own job on the line, walked into the principal's office and said, "Don't mess with my kid - if she is doing something that you disagree with, come and talk with her mother and me. But we support her -- you should know that. Don't mess with my kid."

That was also the day that I found out that the scholarships I had applied for - well, I was not in the running for those anymore. And about that "Outstanding Senior Girl" award that I had it in my head that I was going to win - well, they decided that I was not eligible for that award because I was questioning authority, and that is not something that they wanted to promote. Even though I was conflicted spiritually, (because being a teenager of course who knows everything) I had this really clear picture of what it was that God thought about this whole issue. I really didn't know for sure, in fact I really thought that God thought that Mr. Leffert was sinning, but at the same time, Mr. Leffert had had such an impact on my life - and I knew that God's love was bigger than all of that kind of stuff - I just knew that I had to do this anyway.

Seventy-five people showed up at the school board meeting. We packed the room. And after having heard the story of Rosa Parks and the story about the dean's list at Jackson Community College, I am sure you are thinking you know how this story is going to end – she is going to get up and she is going to make her speech and the School Board is going to say, “We were so wrong, Mr. Leffert is going to keep his job.” But, that's not what happened. They said, “You have given us a lot to think about; we need to deliberate a little longer and we will make our decision Friday morning at 9:00 a.m. when all of you are going to be in school.” (So we don't have to look at all of your 75 faces, when we tell you that we are just going to fire him anyhow.) And that is what they did. Friday morning came, and they fired him anyway.

When the eight of us who were allowed to be at that meeting, walked out of the school board building, there were TV cameras and newspaper cameras and we were crying that ugly cry that teenagers do. There we were on the front page of the paper and on the TV that night, sobbing and wondering why we had gone to all of this trouble if they were just going to fire him anyway.

That is when it became apparent that it is not just about being bold for boldness sake; it is about being part of a community that supports one another that sometimes is what matters most. When I got back to school that day, Mrs. Miesner, who was the German teacher, took me aside and said, “I never - in all my years of teaching - thought that a student would do

such a thing for one of us. Never.” Later that month, Mr. Leffert told us that this had been the darkest part of his whole life, but because of that small group of us decided to stand with him, he was able to get through it.

Sometimes our boldness is just about catching each other when we fall – that’s what being community is all about. That is the Way of Jesus. That is something that the Holy Spirit empowers us to do. And so, friends, I would invite you today to be bold. Amen.