Typically, each Thursday for the school Mass, I'll share a children's book as a segue into the homily, and one of the books I've used over the years is a non-fiction book entitled "The Story of Ruby Bridges."

Ruby Bridges was at one time at the center of the Civil Rights Movement, when she became among the first in New Orleans to go to an integrated school.

Her real-life story is that she was born in Mississippi in 1954, the oldest child of Abon and Lucille Bridges. That year, the United States Supreme Court handed down its landmark decision ordering the integration of public schools. In her own reflection on her life she says she didn't know anything about school at the time. What she knew and loved was growing up on the farm where her paternal grandparents sharecropped.

It was a very hard life, though, and her parents heard there were better opportunities in the city. They moved to New Orleans, where her father found work as a service station attendant, and her mother took night jobs to help support their growing family.

As Ruby got a bit older, her job was to keep an eye on her younger brothers and sister, which wasn't too difficult. Except for church and the long walk to the all-black school where she went to kindergarten, their world didn't extend beyond their block. But that was about to change.

Her mother was all for it. Her father wasn't. "We're just asking for trouble," he said. He thought things weren't going to change, that blacks and whites would never be treated as equals. Her mom thought she would have an opportunity to get a better education if she went to the new school—and a chance for a good job later in life. Her parents argued about it and prayed about it. Eventually her mother convinced her father that, despite the risks, they had to take this step forward, not just for their own children but for all black children.

A federal judge decreed that Monday, November 14, 1960, would be the day black children in New Orleans would go to school with white children. The morning of November 14, federal marshals drove her mother and Ruby the five blocks to William Frantz school In the car, one of the men explained that when they arrived at the school, two marshals would walk in front of them and two behind, so they'd be protected on both sides.

That reminded Ruby of what her Mama had taught them about God, that he is always there to protect us. “Ruby Nell,” she said as they pulled up to her new school, “don’t be afraid. There might be some people upset outside, but I’ll be with you.”

Sure enough, people shouted and shook their fists when they got out of the car, but to Ruby it wasn’t any noisier than Mardi Gras. She held her mother’s hand and followed the marshals through the crowd, up the steps into the school.

They spent that whole day sitting in the principal’s office. Through the window, she saw white parents pointing at them and yelling, then rushing their children out of the school. In the uproar, Ruby never got to her classroom. The marshals drove her mother and her to school again the next day. She tried not to pay attention to the mob. Someone had a black doll in a coffin, and that scared her more than the nasty things people screamed at them.

A young white woman met them inside the building. She smiled at Ruby. “Good morning, Ruby Nell,” she said, just like her Mama except with what she later learned was a Boston accent. “Welcome. I’m your new teacher, Mrs. Henry.” She seemed nice, but Ruby wasn’t sure how to feel about her. She’d never been taught by a white teacher before.

Mrs. Henry took her mother and Ruby to her second-floor classroom. All the desks were empty, and she asked her to choose a seat. She picked one up front, and Mrs. Henry started teaching her the letters of the alphabet.

The next morning, Ruby’s mother told her she couldn’t go to school with her. She had to work and look after her brothers and sister. “The marshals will take good care of you, Ruby Nell,” her Mama assured her. “Remember, if you get afraid, say your prayers. You can pray to God anytime, anywhere. He will always hear you.”

That was how she started praying on the way to school. The things people yelled at her didn’t seem to touch her. Prayer, she says, was her protection. After walking up the steps past the angry crowd, though, she was glad to

see Mrs. Henry. She gave her a hug, and she sat right by her side instead of at the big teacher's desk in the front of the room. Day after day, it was just Mrs. Henry and Ruby, working on her lessons.

Militant segregationists, as the news called them, took to the streets in protest, and riots erupted all over the city. Her parents shielded her as best they could, but she knew problems had come to their family because she was going to the white school. Her father was fired from his job. The white owners of a grocery store told them not to shop there anymore. Even her grandparents in Mississippi suffered. The owner of the land they'd sharecropped for 25 years said everyone knew it was their granddaughter causing trouble in New Orleans, and asked them to move.

At the same time, there were a few white families who braved the protests and kept their children in school. But they weren't in her class, so she didn't see them. People from around the country who'd heard about her on the news sent letters and donations. A neighbor gave her father a job painting houses. Other folks babysat for the family, watched their house to keep away troublemakers, and even walked behind the marshals 'car on Ruby's

way to school. Her family couldn't have made it without their friends 'and neighbors 'help.

And Ruby, she couldn't have got through that year without Mrs. Henry. Sitting next to her in their classroom, just the two of them, Ruby was able to forget the world outside. She made school fun. They did everything together. Ruby couldn't go out in the schoolyard for recess, so right in that room they played games and for exercise did jumping jacks to music.

Ruby remembers her explaining integration to her and why some people were against it. "It's not easy for people to change once they've gotten used to living a certain way," Mrs. Henry said. "Some of them don't know any better, and they're afraid. But not everyone is like that."

Even though Ruby was only six at the time, she understood what she meant. The people she passed every morning as she walked up the school steps were full of hate. They were white, yet so was her teacher, who couldn't have been more different from them. She was one of the most loving people Ruby had ever known. The greatest lesson she learned that year in Mrs. Henry's class was the lesson Martin Luther King Jr. tried to

teach them all. Never judge people by the color of their skin. God makes each of us unique in ways that go much deeper.

From her window, Mrs. Henry always watched Ruby walk into the school. One morning when she got to the classroom, she said she'd been surprised to see Ruby talk to the mob. "I saw your lips moving," she said, "but I couldn't make out what you were saying to those people."
"I wasn't talking to them," Ruby told her. "I was praying for them." Usually, she prayed in the car on the way to school, but that day she'd forgotten until she was in the crowd. "Please be with me," she'd asked God, "and be with those people too. Forgive them because they don't know what they're doing."

"Ruby Nell, you are truly someone special," Mrs. Henry whispered, giving her an even bigger hug than usual. Ruby remembered her teacher had this look on her face like her mother would get when she'd done something to make her proud.

Another person who helped her was Dr. Robert Coles, a child psychiatrist who happened to see her being escorted through the crowd outside her

school. Dr. Coles volunteered to work with her through this ordeal. Soon he was coming to the family house every week to talk with Ruby about how she was doing in school.

Really, she reflects that she was doing fine. She was always with people who wanted the best for her: her family, her friends and—in school—her teacher. The more time she spent with Mrs. Henry, the more she grew to love her. Ruby wanted to be like her. Soon, without realizing it, she had picked up her Boston accent.

Over the school year, the crowd waned; and when Ruby went back to school in September, everything was different. There were no marshals, no protestors. There were other kids—even some other black students—in her second-grade class. Her teacher moved back to Boston, and Ruby later went to business school and studied travel and tourism. For 15 years she worked as a travel agent. Eventually she married and threw herself into raising four sons in the city she grew up in. She'd also reconnect with Mrs. Henry down the road. Ruby would go on to speak to groups around the country. Speaking to kids, she reminds them that we are all a gift from God, each unique and loved. She also tells them another important thing she

learned in first grade is that schools can be a place to bring people together—kids of all races and backgrounds.

That message is at the heart of our second reading, Paul is aware of divisions in his community at Corinth. He urges the faithful there to strive for unity in word and deed, and is upset about the rivalries that have broken out; urging the people that they be united in the same mind and purpose, and that Christ is not divided.

This is nothing new; we see it time and time again today in parishes, in our world; most of the people who were there as Ruby was trying to go to school were Christian in name. And over all of our lives we've seen this kind of division rear its head time and time again. This isn't to say that passion is a bad thing, or that division itself is bad; we are many parts and one body after all, and have differences. But sometimes these things go too far. And if we are going to be a fisher of men like the apostles, a good thing to think about is how we can strive to truly love one another and evangelize in the right way while at the same time knowing there may be more than one way to do something or to bring about change.

The starting point is to remember we are all created in the image and likeness of God. When we start there, we can treat people with greater dignity and see them not just for their function, their politics, their class, but as people God has created whom we are called to love. This has been a challenge; people in front of Ruby's school didn't see that. Some of the people in Paul's little church in Corinth didn't either. And right in recent times, we've seen it too. Everyone has seen some of the unrest locally. There are those who see a federal officer and instantly vilify the officer, calling them names, or a few who refuse service to them. Conversely, there are some who see skin color and see someone as less than someone of another race, or lump everyone together. This is where we have to look at our hearts, and if feelings and emotions are jumping into hate, we need to bring these things to prayer and remember that all people are loved by God. This is hard work. We need to be honest with ourselves, how do we react to our political opposite, or when we see someone who is of a different culture? What words do we use around the house to describe people, or even our Church which some can divide into various camps? If we tear down a person and lump people together based on politics, religion, race, etc., this behavior is learned. It's toxic. You can't control how you feel, but we can control what we do with those feelings. We can pray

for God's help to change; we can make sure we aren't saying things children might pick up on that are wrong; we can strive to get to know the whole person, not just a picture, and be honest with our feelings. It doesn't mean we like everyone, but it begins to change us as we look at one another through the eyes of Christ.

With that, as Jesus makes us fishers of men, we need to know what to put on the fishing hook, namely our faith. And this is where things can become tough. What does the Church say about faith and morals or issues? The catechism is helpful, and there are some teachings we call dogmas and things that will not change. These include things like the teaching on protection of the unborn, gender, and marriage. Racism is also clearly defined along with slavery and the dignity of the human person. There are things that are close to clearly defined, like capital punishment, the tiny option for it being in the rare situation a violent criminal cannot be imprisoned to protect society. Immigration has gotten a lot of publicity of late, and this is one of the many teachings of the Church that does not fit into a neat category. Immigrants have rights to find a better life. But the country to which they are immigrating has rights too as do the people that live there. As such, specific policies aren't spelled out. I became aware of

some of the tensions around this myself when as a seminarian, I spent a summer in an Hispanic parish, and the priest at the time told me of the tensions between the older community, who had come to the US legally through a process and established businesses and the neighborhood, dealt with some coming here illegally. It was a complicated issue then and it is still now. As such you can't say the Church says keep all immigrants out, or the Church says have an open border. And this is where the work is done, where you look at the catechism, writings of the saints, and we strive to form our consciences to bring about the changes we feel are needed.

Third, how is the change brought about? Being a fisher of men is about evangelizing. And this is where we educate ourselves and act in a right way. Ruby's teacher, Mrs. Henry, was doing just that in being there for her. When you go back to the Civil Rights movement, you see people from all faiths and cultures coming together to march peacefully, which is still inspiring. In recent times though, it is heartbreaking to see the mob mentality - frankly not different from the mob on Good Friday shouting to kill Christ, because sin is just as present is now as it was then - where a few are out there vilifying all police officers, in particular federal officers. We also saw this in how a few did this to soldiers coming back from Vietnam.

The Beatles put it well in the song “Revolution” “we all want to change the world but when you talk about destruction, don’t you know you can count me out…if you want money for people with minds that hate all I can tell you is brother you have to wait... if you go around carrying pictures of Chairman Mao, you ain’t going to make it with anyone anyhow.” It’s easy to scream and shout or to hide behind social media or to just scroll on social media as the algorithm learns what our slant is and feeds us story after story. The right way is to work at changing the laws we feel need to be changed. And this is what is so troubling when I see law enforcement taunted or in some cases attacked; at all levels of law enforcement, officers are enforcing laws passed by Congress, and at all levels, including the recent publicity of federal immigration enforcement, it is a fact that many criminals have been removed with extensive criminal histories. Law enforcement at all levels do good work which is why I pray for them and am so grateful for what they do. I’d hope no one would ever act hostile towards any officer. Rather, the work of change is done by being involved. By rediscovering what it really means to argue, not shout; as in seminary when we studied philosophy before theology, learning how to formulate arguments. Anyone can hop on social media or make comments, but voting, going to your party’s caucus (they are next week), or testifying before a committee at the capital (as

citizens can do) takes work. It does not happen overnight; as we saw with Roe v. Wade for instance it took years; and may laws exist we do not like take time to change, but we need to be patient and work for change, not target people who enforce laws - whether it's the Immigration officer or the security guard or volunteer at a Planned Parenthood. Working for change isn't easy but it's necessary if we want to bring it about.

With this, we must remember that working for change is tough. People will sometimes hate you for what you believe. Even within families, like with Ruby's mom convincing her dad that this was important - there can be some friction. The mob might come for you too and gossip about you or say this or that online - fortitude though is the virtue that helps us to persevere.

We also need to dialogue with one another. Why is someone so angry? What do they really think? We've lost that ability as we hide behind our phones and screens. We may not always agree, but only by talking things through can we understand one another. Empathy is a good thing. What is it like for an immigration officer on their daily shift? You can watch for yourself online. Similarly, what is it like for an immigrant who is trying to

seek a better life, what have they gone through? We can also learn their story and fears as we form our conscience.

Lastly, like Ruby going to school, we can pray for one another. We can pray for law enforcement at all levels. We can pray for immigrants and those under stress or seeking a better life. We can pray for those who hate us. We can pray for ourselves to calm down and talk vs shout and argue vs. verbally abuse.

I love this reading Paul gives us this week because it's so appropriate for the start of Catholic Schools Week. Ruby's story is so powerful because kids so often get it better than adults; they love one another, care for one another, and teach us so much about human relationships before things like ideology, racism, or hatred over politics or other things creep in as people age. They so often show compassion and care, and I've been privileged to see that in all of the 4 parishes I've served at each with a school. As we age and become more aware of the effects of original sin in our lives, we must never forget on the one hand it darkens the intellect; so we begin to see through the glass darkly as Paul would say becoming divided in our souls and with one another. When grace enters the picture,

we remember it is given to all of us as a free gift from God. There is no getting around division in the world, in our country and in our Church. And in many ways, it can be a good thing. Division can be toxic too, which is what Paul is aware of in Corinth and why he speaks so boldly against it. Have passion by all means, but how about we work on trying to remember we all belong to God, and rather than focus on what separates, work on trying to bring one another to the heavenly kingdom? What a good thing it is when we follow our Lord. For just as a net brings all kinds of fish into the boat, so too when we cast our nets will all kinds of people be brought into the heavenly kingdom, equally loved by the Master Fisherman without exception.