Rosa McCauley Parks:
Taking A Stand for Justice

Rosa Parks was born in 1913 and died in 2005. Known today as “the mother of the Civil Rights Movement,” Mrs. Parks almost single-handedly set in motion a series of events that would eventually secure equal treatment under the law for all black Americans. For those who lived through the unsettling 1950s and 1960s and joined the civil rights struggle, the soft-spoken Rosa Parks was more than the woman who refused to give up her bus seat to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama. She was a symbol of social justice and an embodiment of human dignity and the quest for human rights.

Growing Up With Racism

Parks was born Rosa McCauley in Tuskegee, Alabama. When she was still a young child, she moved to Montgomery. Montgomery, Alabama, was not a hospitable city for blacks then. As she grew up, Rosa saw white children riding buses to schools she could not attend, and she daily faced laws governing all aspects of her actions. Rosa had to drink from special water fountains marked "Colored" and was not able to go to the places whites could visit freely. She also witnessed the violence of the Ku Klux Klan. Still, with her mother’s help, Rosa was able to grow up proud of herself and other black people, even while living with these rules. Her mother, a teacher, taught Rosa that people should be judged by the respect they have for themselves and others. Rosa did well in school, worked hard, and carried herself with a gentle dignity. She also became a young woman of faith, a faith which supported and motivated her.

At the age of 20, Rosa married Raymond Parks. The couple both worked and enjoyed a modest degree of prosperity. Mrs. Parks also became very active in the NAACP and the Montgomery Voters League, a group that helped blacks to pass a special test so they could register to vote. She spent time studying and discussing the problems of segregation.

By the time she reached mid-life, Rosa Parks had been doing quiet acts to resist injustice. Like many other Southern blacks, she often boycotted the public facilities marked “Colored,” walking up stairs rather than taking “Colored” elevators, for example. Like many other black citizens, she was also concerned about the unjust public transportation, as were blacks had to enter the bus at the front door, pay the fare, exit the front door, walk to the back bus door and enter there. It was not uncommon for bus drivers to drive off after the black riders paid, got off, and were walking toward the rear bus entrance. Even though the majority of bus passengers in Montgomery were black, the front four rows of seats were always reserved for white customers. It was a common sight in those days to see African American men and women standing next to empty seats reserved for whites. Behind these four seats was a middle section that blacks could use only if there was no white demand. In the year preceding Parks’s fateful ride, three other black women had been arrested for refusing to give their seats to white men. Still, the system was firmly entrenched, and Parks would often walk to her home to spare herself the humiliation of the bus.

An Act for Justice

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks, then 42 years old, was waiting for a bus to return home from work. Even though well educated, she could only find work as a seamstress at a department store. She deliberately let one full bus pass in order to find a seat on the next one. The seat she found was in the middle section of the bus, because the back was filled. A few stops further down the line, a white man got on and demanded her seat. The driver ordered Parks and three other black customers to move to the back of the bus and stand. The other riders did as they were told, but Parks quietly refused to give up her place.

“I find that if I’m thinking too much of my own problems, and the fact that, at times, things are not just what I want them to be, I won’t make any progress at all. But if I look around and see what I can do, and go on with that, then I can move on.”
—Rosa Parks
The driver threatened to call the police. Parks decided it was time she took a stand on this particular injustice, and she refused again and was arrested. “People always say that I didn’t give up my seat because I was tired but that wasn’t true. I was not tired physically. I was not old. I was 42. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in to injustice.” Parks was driven to the police station, booked, fingerprinted, and jailed. Granted one telephone call, she used it to contact E. D. Nixon, a member of Montgomery’s NAACP chapter. Nixon sensed that in Parks the community might have the perfect individual to serve as a symbol of the struggle for equal rights. A white lawyer, Clifford Durr, agreed to represent Parks. After consulting with the attorney, her husband, and her mother, Rosa Parks agreed to undertake a court challenge of the segregationist law that had led to her arrest.

Bus Boycott
Word of Parks’s arrest spread quickly through Montgomery’s black community, and several leaders decided the time was right for a boycott of the public transportation system. One of these leaders, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., used a mimeograph machine at his Baptist church to make 7,000 leaflets advertising the boycott: “Please don’t ride the bus to work, to town, to school, or any place Monday, December 5. If you work, take a cab, or share a ride, or walk.”

The black boycott of Montgomery’s city buses meant that the bus system lost almost 40,000 riders, and much revenue, on December 5, 1955. A church meeting that evening drew an overflow crowd, and they decided to continue the boycott indefinitely. For 381 days, African Americans car-pooled and walked to work and church. Their unified effort resulted in a court order to integrate the buses. The success of the bus boycott, watched by the world through the modern media, triggered the national Civil Rights movement and made a living legend of Rosa Parks. The strong faith in God and the non-violent commitment of Parks and the others in the boycott were a witness of justice and peace to the world.

In 1957, after years of receiving threats in Alabama, Mrs. Parks and her family moved to Detroit, Michigan. She was sought out repeatedly as a spokesperson for the civil rights movement. She continued to have an ardent devotion to human rights, working in many ways to further racial justice. Mrs. Parks was always gracious and gentle, yet she had great strength and the determination to help create a better world. She also founded the Parks Institute for Self Development in Detroit. The institute works with 12- to 18-year-old African Americans to motivate them to do their best in school and to learn what is necessary to succeed in life.

A number of universities have awarded her honorary degrees and she was honored at Washington’s Kennedy Center on her 77th birthday. She received the prestigious Medal of Freedom award from President Bill Clinton in 1996, who said: “When she sat down on the bus, she stood up for the American ideals of equality and justice and demanded that the rest of us do the same.”

Sources: [www.gale.com](http://www.gale.com) and [www.time.com](http://www.time.com).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS
- What would it be like to live under conditions that constantly reminded you that you were a second-class citizen: not allowed to eat in certain restaurants, not allowed to go to schools of your choice, not allowed to sit on certain seats on buses, not allowed to stay in hotels where people of a “superior race” stayed, not allowed to have certain jobs?
- How would you have responded to the conditions Rosa Park and others faced under segregation?
- How did Rosa Parks demonstrate the power of nonviolent resistance when she refused to give up her bus seat?
- What principles of Catholic social teaching are evident in the non-violent Civil Rights movement?
- Why is Rosa Parks an inspiration to not only African Americans and people of color but to all people who are working for social justice?

PRAYER IN HONOR OF ROSA PARKS
We thank God for your life, Rosa Parks. You sat down for justice so hundreds of thousands of Americans could stand up in dignity. You were the spark of a non-violent movement, the catalyst that changed an entire society, helping us all to see the unjust system of segregation. We are thankful for your generous spirit and quiet courage that gave hope to so many and that inspired an entire generation. You will remain a role model for us, reminding us what one person can do to challenge injustice in a peaceful way. We do not know what roles our prayers and our actions may have in confronting injustice. Like you, we trust in the Spirit to move us. May we, too, take those small steps that can open the way to a better world. Amen.