

# "I Have No Hands (or Voice, Eyes, and Heart) But Yours" --

## Reflections for Youth on Living the Sacrament/Experience of Confirmation

by [Jim McGinnis](#)

*Note: When I do this presentation in person, I use the slides and video identified in the footnotes.*

The one story I remember from my years of high school religious education starred an American soldier in Italy during World War II. As he was walking through the mountains, he came upon a statue of Jesus. It was partly hidden behind some tall weeds. As he approached the statue, he noticed that the hands of Jesus were broken off and nowhere to be found. As he sat meditating on the handless statue, an inspiration came to him which he wrote on a piece of paper and placed it under a rock at the base of the statue. He gave the statue a 6-word name - "I have no hands but yours."

I still remember that story and message so clearly, 45 years after I first heard it. It (Jesus) was saying to me - "Jim, I have no hands but yours. I need your hands to do my work at this time in history wherever you go (wherever I send you)." My Confirmation experience suddenly made greater sense. As confirmed followers of Jesus, we are truly called to be His hands - and voice and eyes and heart for others. And this calls for great love and courage. That's why I sometimes wear a red stole with the symbol of the Holy Spirit as a flame sown on it, along with a button of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. These symbols of love and courage can remind us to draw on the grace of these symbols and put what they symbolize into practice.

One expression of a life of love and courage that has been effective for many youth since its formulation in 1996, as well as for adults and children, is the Pledge of Nonviolence. For youth groups, the appropriate version is entitled the [Youth Group Pledge of Nonviolence](#). For youth in their high school setting, it is called the [Youth Pledge of Nonviolence](#). While all seven components of the Pledge embody specific ways of putting love and courage into practice, three especially stand out: Respect Self & Others, Forgive,

and Act Courageously. (1)

## 1. Respect

This component of the Pledge stresses the importance of affirming others, not putting them down. Especially in a society where disrespect seems to be escalating - on highways in the form of road-rage, in stores and parking lots as harried individuals get frustrated and take it out on others, in the language youth and adults use with one another in real life as well as on television - confirmed Christians are called on to escalate respect and kindness.

The importance of responding to escalating disrespect and violence with escalating kindness and love was brought home to me personally on January 18, 1991. On the national holiday observing the birthday of Dr. King, the bombing of Iraq began late afternoon. In St. Louis several hundred people gathered downtown at Christ Church Cathedral to pray and reflect on this event which we had all been working to avert. After a while, I began walking alone downtown, praying for a sense of how I should respond to this escalation of violence by our government. Within a few minutes, Jesus clearly answered my prayer as the words formed in my soul - "in the face of escalating violence, escalate love!"

But what forms should this escalation of love take? One idea that came to me soon became a daily practice that has continued to this day. My 30-minute walk each day at sunrise takes me past many houses where the newspapers on the sidewalk are many steps from the front door. Why not porch these papers, I thought. Yes, but what if the people come out their side doors and down the driveway and can't find their papers? So I decided to "scout" the houses for a while until I saw which way the person came for the paper (and also whether they were elderly, in their bathrobes, etc - in other words, who was the "neediest" of my little random act of kindness). Gradually over the years the number of "recipients" grew to more than 20 or 25, depending on how early I got there.

But a couple of years ago, I departed from my "M.O." and started "porching" one newspaper even though I had never seen the person(s) who lived there. By the way, "porching" the newspaper(s) meant much more than when I was a

newspaper boy 50 years ago throwing the papers from my bike. No, "porching" now means placing the newspaper(s) gently on the mat in front of the front door with a silent prayerful greeting ("Pace e Bene" - St. Francis of Assisi's warm greeting of "Peace and Good"). Anyway, "something told me" to add this new house to my list of beneficiaries. Two months later, walking by on a Saturday afternoon, I noticed an elderly woman working in the front yard. I wondered whether I should stop and ask her if I was being helpful. But then I'd be revealing who was doing this and part of the point was NOT getting caught and hoping that maybe the beneficiaries would "pay it forward" (in some kind of kind deed for others) rather than try to "pay me back."

I hesitated several times about going back to speak to her, but finally decided to do so. "I'm the guy who's been porching your newspapers, but I'm not sure if it's been helpful to you. Maybe you came out the driveway and couldn't find them." "Helpful?" she responded. "My husband was recently diagnosed with cancer and it's been very hard for both of us. But each morning when I open the front door and see my newspapers right there on the mat, I know that God has visited our home. You have been my angel every morning."

I was stunned. Of course I had no idea what my actions had meant for them. Often we don't know how God uses us. If I ever needed convincing that God uses even our smallest acts of kindness, that did it. What a way to start a day - by escalating love, kindness and respect. And it has led to many other ways of doing so.

Two of my heroes of escalating love are both available on video. One is fictional; the other real. But both their actions can be made very real in our lives. The first I have already hinted at. Trevor, the 7th grade hero in the movie PAY IT FORWARD, created a scheme of kind deeds that truly fulfilled his social studies assignment of coming up with an original idea that would make the world a better place. In his scheme, he would do something difficult for three people, something they couldn't do for themselves. In return, he hoped that they would each do three similar deeds for three others, until kind deeds were escalating geometrically. Trevor's scheme reinforced my own random acts of kindness and challenged me to do more. We'll return to Trevor later.

But before turning to my second hero, I want you to consider the example I shared as an example of the spirit embodied in Trevor's "pay it forward" scheme and answer this question: what might be your own random act(s) of kindness that you can make a part of your daily life? Perhaps at home with other family members? Perhaps at school? Perhaps in your neighborhood? Perhaps with people confined to their sickbeds or prison cells, people who may rarely receive cards or letters? I encourage you to pray over this and make a decision, perhaps in the next day or two and write it down. You might also share your decision with someone you trust, as a way of holding yourself accountable for carrying out your decision.

My second hero is Sr. Helen Prejean, a Catholic nun who became a visitor/friend of a man on death row in Louisiana. In her book (and the movie) *DEAD MAN WALKING*, she tells us about her visit with Patrick the day before his execution, when she asks him if he would like her to be present in the observation room to witness his execution. When he said yes, she told him that at that last moment he should look into her eyes and she would be "the face of Christ for you." She would be the eyes of Jesus looking lovingly and forgivingly at him at that ultimate moment.

What a message to all of us. Each day Jesus asks us to be His face, His eyes for others, for He has no eyes but ours. How can we escalate love as the eyes of Jesus each day? At home, school, the neighborhood, perhaps even with strangers in stores or walking down the street or in elevators for whom a smile and/or friendly greeting would mean more than you think?

## **2. Forgiveness**

Perhaps the most difficult escalation of love is forgiveness. And it takes courage as well as love, for your outstretched hand of reconciliation may be rejected or even taken advantage of. As with escalating kindness, it's good to have some models of forgiveness who can inspire us to follow Jesus to the point of ultimate forgiveness - "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

My two heroes of forgiveness are both real, but one was only six years old; the other a father who found the courage to forgive even his daughter's

murderer. First, Ruby Bridges. As Robert Coles tells the story (2) - "Ruby Bridges was 6 years old in 1960 when she was chosen to be the first African American student to integrate one of the New Orleans public schools... Every morning Ruby walked to school and had to pass through a crowd of angry adults yelling and cursing at her... None of the white parents would allow their first-graders to come to school all year because of Ruby. She was the only student for her teacher that year... Every day Ruby's teacher would watch her walk through the crowd of angry adults, hoping that nothing would happen to Ruby. One morning she noticed that Ruby had stopped in the middle of the crowd... She saw Ruby's lips moving. When Ruby got to her room, her teacher asked what she was saying to the adults. Ruby replied that she wasn't talking to them; she was praying for them. She said that every morning just before crossing the street to the block where her school was, she would stop and say a prayer for these angry adults. This morning, however, she had forgotten to say that prayer and remembered only when she was walking past them. So she stopped and said her prayer right there. And this is how she prayed:

'Please, God, try to forgive those people. Because even if they say those bad things, they don't know what they're doing. So You could forgive them, just like You did those folks a long time ago when they said terrible things about You.'

In the face of the escalating violence of her adult adversaries, Ruby escalated forgiving love for a whole school year. But her second-grade classroom was filled the following year.

Bud Welch was a "fifty-something" when his 23-year-old daughter Julie was killed by Timothy McVeigh, along with 167 other victims of the Oklahoma City bombing in April 1995. (3) For nine months Bud raged inside with a desire for revenge. But it was so eating him up that he finally begged for the grace of forgiveness and arranged to meet with Timothy McVeigh's father. Sitting at his breakfast room table one Saturday morning, Bud discovered that Timothy's father was in as much agony as he was. The next step was meeting Timothy himself, which Bud did a number of times before Timothy's execution. We don't know whether Timothy ever expressed remorse to Bud, but Bud did not make his forgiveness conditional on Timothy's remorse. In the face of all that terrorist rage and killing, Bud Welch escalated forgiving love. On the chain-link fence that used to

surround the bomb site was a memorial cross with the words "[168 Reasons to Love One Another](#)" on the cross beam. It is this message of Jesus' forgiving love that Bud has been carrying across the US, pleading for an end to the death penalty.

Our own situations of hurting and being hurt are very real and sometimes very painful. Asking for forgiveness and making amends for the times we have hurt others and extending that same forgiveness to those who have hurt us give us unique opportunities to participate in the incredible compassion of Jesus. Each time we reach out our hand in a gesture of reconciliation, we become the reconciling heart of Jesus. I have no hands and heart but yours, Jesus says again and again to us, offering us the grace to be his hands and heart.

### **3. Courage**

The last component of the Youth Pledge of Nonviolence reads: "To actively challenge violence in all its forms whenever I encounter it, whether at home, at school, at work, or in the community; and to stand with others who are treated unfairly, even if it means standing alone." As with the section on forgiveness, I want to lift up several models of courage - the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and 12-year-old Trevor, the hero in the movie PAY IT FORWARD, plus an example from my own life as a young man, an example that helped me understand the meaning of my Confirmation.

The experience of Confirmation is filled with the call and grace to act courageously in the face of escalating violence. Mature Christians are challenged and equipped to be the voice of Jesus, for he has no voice but ours. And youth is not an acceptable excuse for not embracing this call to be like Jesus, the prophetic voice of God. God calls youth of our day just as God called 16-year-old Jeremiah:

"The word of Yahweh was addressed to me, saying: 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you came to birth I consecrated you; I have appointed you as prophet to the nations.' I said, 'Ah, Lord Yahweh; look, I do not know how to speak: I am a child!' But Yahweh replied, 'Do not say, "I am a child". Go now to those to whom I send you and say whatever I

command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to protect you -- it is Yahweh who speaks!' Then Yahweh put out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me: 'There! I am putting my words into your mouth...' (Jeremiah 1:4-9; (4) see the "Me a Prophet?" worksheet for the text and reflection questions).

We don't think of ourselves as prophets, certainly not prophets to whole nations. But God does have some people we are to reach out to as messengers of God's challenging love.

Dr. King is perhaps the clearest example of a prophet of God for our time. But we could never be like Dr. King, right? Well, Dr. King, like us, was afraid of this call. As he tells it, Dr. King acknowledging his own fears at age 26, just weeks after agreeing to be the leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Sitting at his kitchen table in January 1956, he picked up the phone and heard -- "'Listen, nigger, we've taken all we want from you. Before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery.' I hung up but I could not sleep... I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing to be a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had almost gone, I determined to take my problem to God. My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud:

"I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership. If I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left... I can't face it alone.'

"At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced God. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: 'Stand up for righteousness; stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever.' Almost at once my fears began to pass from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm. Three nights later, our home was bombed."

(written on the wall of the display of Dr. King's kitchen, in the Civil Rights Museum in Atlanta, Georgia)

Does this surprise you about Dr. King? He was 26 years old at this point. He turned to prayer in the face of his fears? How do you handle yours? Eleven

years later, Dr. King delivered perhaps his most difficult and most important speech, entitled "When Silence Is Betrayal." In this speech he escalated his challenge to the nation and to people of faith to speak out against the war in Vietnam and against an economic system in this country that continues to exploit the poor here and overseas, as well as against the evil of racism. His words are quite helpful, especially when we aren't sure about what is really the truth, when the issues are so complex and scary as they are in times of war:

"A time comes when silence is betrayal. Even when pressed by the demands of inner truth, men [and women] do not easily assume the task of opposing their government's policy, especially in time of war. Nor does the human spirit move without great difficulty against all the apathy of conformist thought within one's own bosom and in the surrounding world. Moreover, when the issues at hand seem as perplexing as they often do in the case of dreadful conflict, we are always on the verge of being mesmerized by uncertainty. But we must move on.

"Some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak. For we are deeply in need of a new way beyond the darkness that seems so close around us.

"We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation, for those it calls "enemy," for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers. I think of them, too, because it is clear to me that there will be no meaningful solution until some attempt is made to know them and hear their broken cries.

"I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered..."

(Riverside Church, New York, April 4, 1967).

Like Jesus when he came into Jerusalem and challenged the powers of his own day, this speech got Dr. King in a whole lot of trouble. Exactly one year

later he was assassinated in Memphis, TN, on the eve of a march with striking garbage workers. He had been to Memphis the week before leading a march that was interrupted by some youths breaking windows and looting stores. The National Guard was called into Memphis to enforce a curfew and maintain order. I was one of those National Guardsmen. After six days of quiet, we were sent back to our homes and jobs. The next day, April 4, I was visiting my wife in a Memphis hospital. We were watching the evening news which was interrupted at 5:55 PM by a special bullet announcing that Dr. King had been shot.

I knew I had to report to our unit's headquarters in the local armory for active duty immediately. An hour later, I was in line for live ammunition for our rifles. The two soldiers in front of me were shaking with excitement, not fear, for, in their words, "tonight we're gonna bag us some n...s!" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Later that evening patrolling the streets of Memphis, the truck I was in stopped to check out a parked car with an African American man at the wheel. Three Guardsmen jumped out of the truck, hauled the man out of his car, spread him out against the hood, searched him, spun him around and sprayed a can of mace right in his eyes. Then they shoved him back in his car, ran back to our truck, jumped in back laughing and said proudly "did you see what we did to that n...?" Again I couldn't believe what I had just seen and heard. I knew it was wrong, terribly wrong. Dr. King was a hero to me. But I didn't really know these guys - I had just joined the unit and was considered a "Yankee" from up north. I was afraid and just sat there. All night I wondered what to do.

The next day I decided to write a letter to the editor of one of Memphis' daily newspapers, praising Dr. King as a great American and challenging some of the things being said about him. Three days later my letter appeared in the newspaper. That night, posted on a bulletin board outside the mess hall in the armory, was my letter, circled in red and with a red line through it with the word "N...LOVER" written across it. I didn't know what to expect as I entered the mess hall for dinner. It wasn't pleasant, nor was the walk outside after dinner. Finally my company commander sent me home for my safety.

Two days later was Good Friday 1968. As I prayed in the chapel at Christian Brothers College where I was on the faculty, I came to a whole new

understanding of what the Cross of Jesus was all about, what my Confirmation was about, and what Jesus was expecting from me. I didn't have the courage to be his voice in the ammunition line or in the army truck that fateful night, but I did decide to report what I had seen to the local NAACP office and eventually to the Tennessee Commission on Civil Rights. I was 25 years old.

36 years later, Dr. King and Jesus continue to challenge me (and you) to speak out against the violence of racism, sexism, homophobia, poverty, war, and those many situations where someone(s) is mistreating someone else. What fears do you find within yourself when you hear these challenging words and stories? What opportunities have you had recently when you could have spoken out and didn't? What opportunities have you had in your life when you did speak out? Think about this for a moment before we consider our final "model" of courage.

Now back to Trevor's "pay it forward" scheme of doing a difficult kind deed for three different persons, something they can't do for themselves. If you saw the movie, you may recall that Trevor was able to befriend a homeless man, reconcile his mother and her mother, even encourage a romantic relationship between his mother and his social studies teacher, but one deed he "chickened out" doing - standing up for a classmate who had been picked on by several tougher students. (5)

[Note: at this point it is helpful to show the final five minutes of the movie where Trevor finds the courage to stand up for this classmate and what happens. After viewing this segment, raise these questions: What good did it do? Was it worth it? In a similar situation what would you have done? Have you ever been in situations like this? What did you or didn't you do? What would you like to be able to do the next time you're in such a situation?

"I have no hands, no eyes, no heart, no voice on earth but yours," we hear Jesus say to us one more time. Do we dare to be the hands and eyes, the heart and voice of Jesus? Let's pray together for the love and courage to embrace this call. "Jesus, send us your Spirit of love and courage to help us respect and love others, as Sr. Helen Prejean and others we admire have done; to help us forgive and ask forgiveness, as Ruby Bridges and Bud Welch and others we admire have done. And at this critical moment in our nation's

history, help us stand and speak against violence in all its forms, as Jeremiah and Dr. King and others we admire have done." (6)

## Footnotes

(1) See the website for the Institute for Peace and Justice - [www.ipj-ppj.org](http://www.ipj-ppj.org) - for resources on peacemaking and the Pledge of Nonviolence. Click on "Diocesan & Other Religious Leaders" and see what's available for youth ministers, religious educators, and others; also click on "Children & Youth" and "Families" for many items for youth and families.

(2) THE STORY OF RUBY BRIDGES, Scholastic Books, 1995.

(3) Photos of the Oklahoma City bomb site - of the memorial to Julie Welch and others and of the cross with "[168 Reasons to Love One Another](#)" - are also available from IPJ.

(4) You might use the "[Me a Prophet?](#)" worksheet so that youth can have the text before them and then use it again at the end of the session for further reflection and decisions.

(5) PAY IT FORWARD can be found in all major video stores.

(6) You might use the "[Me a Prophet?](#)" worksheet as a way for youth to reflect further and make some decisions about how God may want to use them as a prophet at this point in their lives.