* **Sermon Black History Month Steve Taddei**

**LISTEN – Sermon–** *You can listen to the sermon from Steve Taddei* [***here***](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hfBLrrs4u_lDo0x58oj0yxZqF7YSVXQ5/view?usp=share_link)*.*

It was 1945:

* We had won WWII, the economy was great, and our confidence was at our highest.
* Americans did 3 things in 1947. We worked, we watched baseball, and we made babies.
* If you were a kid growing up in the United States you probably wanted to be a major league ball player.
* To make it in the Majors, you needed to have three things going for you.
  + You had to have talent.
  + You had to work hard.
  + And, because of a so-called gentlemen’s agreement that the baseball owners reached in the 1880s, you had to be white.

This morning as we discuss the many decisions that led to the breaking of the color barrier, I’d like to acknowledge two people for their generosity:

* Lee Lowenfish, author of Branch Rickey, Baseball’s Most Ferocious Gentleman
* Dr. Carmen Nanko-Fernandez, The Catholic Theological Union in Chicago Both were generous in speaking with me about this subject.

Who was Jackie Robinson?

* Jackie Robinson was a competitor, who was strong-willed and had a lot of integrity.
* Jackie Robinson was born in rural Georgia in 1919.
* When Jackie was an infant, his mother Mallie made the decision to leave a bad marriage, moving her five children to Pasadena, California.
* When the Robinsons arrived in Pasadena, they joined and became active members of the Scott Methodist Church.
* As Jackie was growing up, he had some trouble with the law.
* A youth pastor named Karl Downs took an interest in Jackie, helped him stay out of trouble, thrive in school, and graduate from UCLA.
* While he lettered in football, basketball, track, and baseball, his best sport might have been Tennis. His best sport certainly wasn’t baseball.
* After UCLA, Jackie Robinson served in the U.S. Army earning the rank of 2nd Lieutenant.
* He was court martialed over a confrontation regarding giving his seat up on a bus in Texas and was subsequently acquitted and was honorably discharged.
* In 1945, Jackie played for the Kansas City Monarch in the Negro American Leagues.

So, who was Branch Rickey?

* Branch Rickey was a competitor, who was strong-willed and had a lot of integrity.
* Branch Rickey was also raised in a devoutly Methodist Family. While Rickey went by the name Branch, his given first name was Wesley, named after the founder of the Methodist Church. In fact, his middle name Branch came from the Bible verse that was read earlier (Isaiah 11:1).
* Rickey’s mother would sit young Branch on her knee and read Bible verses.
* Lowenfish said that Rickey was fond of John Wesley’s quote:

“Do all the good you can, By all the means you can, In all the ways you can, In all the places you can, At all the times you can, To all the people you can, As long as ever you can.”

* Branch Rickey attended Ohio Wesleyan University, playing baseball and coaching the baseball team when his playing days were over.
* An incident from 1910, 9 years before Jackie Robinson was born, is evidence that Branch Rickey was interested in integrating baseball decades before the 1940s.
* Ohio Wesleyan traveled to South Bend Indiana for a game against Notre Dame. When the team arrived at the hotel, the clerk would not give a room to Charles Thomas, Ohio Wesleyan’s catcher who was African American.
* Rickey, in his 20s at the time, took the issue up the chain of command, threatening to take his team to the YMCA if his entire team couldn’t stay in this hotel.
* Finally, the hotel’s upper management agreed to put a cot in his room and let Charles Thomas room with Coach Rickey.
* Charles Tomas became a dentist in Albuquerque, NM and stayed in contact with Rickey for the rest of their lives.
* In the years before Jackie Robinson was born and while he was growing up in Pasadena, Branch Rickey was in various management positions:
  + In St. Louis, served in WWI, went back to St. Louis, and joined the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1942.

Branch Rickey recruited Jackie from the Kansas City Monarchs.

* During the interview process, Rickey knew Robinson had integrity; he knew he had the backbone to stand up for himself.
* A black man in 1945 needed one more thing.
* Jackie Robinson needed to make the decision to take the abuse he was destined to get without fighting back.

Dr. Carmen Nanko-Fernandez quotes Branch Rickey

“I had to get a man who could carry the burden on the field.

I needed a man to carry the badge of martyrdom on the field and off.

In their meeting, Rickey threw every racial epitaph you can imagine Robinson’s way.

Jackie sat in his chair and took it.”

Quote From Jackie Robinson’s Autobiography:

“Mr. Rickey told me I would have to stand a lot of guff without losing my temper or making a scene. He even acted out several situations I’d likely face, and then asked me how I would meet each one of them. I wasn’t too happy over the prospect that he foresaw but I knew too, that I was pretty sure to run into some name-calling some insults, and some Jim Crow.”

African American Reporter Doc Young:

“The Negro player had to actually be a better man, and at least as skilled an athlete as the Caucasian player just to be considered. College-bred, one of history’s greatest all-around athletes, as honest as Jesus, as clean as laundered white-on-white, as pure as Ivory, as emotionless as a Sphinx, as cool as Sky Blue Waters merely to get the chance.”

Branch Rickey was fond of a Giovanni Papini’s 1923 book, “Life of Christ.” Three Responses to violence.

* Revenge is unacceptable because it does not break the cycle of violence.
* Flight serves only to bolster the enemy’s resolve.
* The only response that also breaks the cycle is turning the other cheek. In doing so, the second blow is never received because the adversary, expecting retaliation or flight, is confused and humiliated into abstaining from the violent action.

Rickey didn’t just have discussions with Robinson, he went to the Black Community in and around Brooklyn warning people:

* Don’t go to the ballpark and carry on while supporting Jackie Robinson.
* Don’t go to the ballpark and drink too much.
* Don’t keep inviting him to dinner and risk having him gain weight.

Did you ever take on a job and think you might flame out?

* That’s happened to me several times. The worst-case scenario was that if I flamed out, the company would just look at me as a bad fit.
* If things went bad with the experiment of integrating baseball, it would have affected future decisions about bringing in black ballplayers.
* It was all on Jackie Robinson’s shoulders.

So, what happened after Jackie Robinson made the agreement with Branch Rickey and the Before the Signing

Branch Rickey visited Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims in Brooklyn.

* Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims, originally led by Henry Ward Beecher.
* Pastor Beecher was an anti-slavery activist and Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims played an important role in the Underground Railroad.

Branch Rickey’s Day of decision, The writings of Dr. L. Wendell Fifield, was the church’s pastor in 1945.

Branch Rickey’s Day of decision

“Don’t let me interrupt. I can’t talk with you, Rickey said as he walked into the minister’s office. I just want to be here. Do you mind? The two men passed the time without

words–the minister going about his work; Rickey frantically pacing the floor, stopping only occasionally to peer out the window in the Brooklyn Heights neighborhood that surrounded the church. Amid the ongoing silence, more pacing, more stopping, more pacing, more stopping from Rickey, for some 45 minutes. Finally, Rickey didn’t just break the silence, he shattered it. ‘I’ve got it.’ Rickey yelled as he banged his fist on the desk. ‘Got what Branch Fifield asked?’ ‘Wendell, I’ve decided to sign Jackie Robinson.’ Rickey straightened his bow tie, donned his worn hat, and offered, ‘Bless you Wendell,’ and then left the room.

* Jackie Robinson signed that contract to play for the Dodgers.
* He was assigned to play the 1946 season with the Dodgers’ minor league team in Montreal.
* He played his first game with the Brooklyn Dodgers on April 15, 1947
* Jackie Robinson got the ball rolling, in more ways than one.
* In 1939, he was a Rose Bowl Hero and 4-sport star at & UCLA.
* That was 15 years before Brown vs. The Board of Education desegregated schools.
* In 1944, Jackie Robinson was court martialed for not giving up his seat on the bus.
* That was 11 years before Rosa Parks.
* In 1947, Jackie Robinson played his first game as a Brooklyn Dodger; it was 16 years before Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream Speech.”
* Jackie Robinson was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1962, his first year of eligibility and passed away in 1972 at the age of 53.

Larry Kings, “My Remarkable Journey”

In an interview Larry King had with Dr. Martin Luther King, Dr. King said that the most important figure in the civil rights movement was Jackie Robinson, saying essentially that his historic breaking of the color line in 1947 was truly the starting point of launching the movement itself.

Rachel Robinson, Jackie’s widow turned 100. She was unaware of Mr. Rickey’s encounter with Rev. Fifield.

“It reinforces my view of Mr. Rickey and my experiences with him.

I believe he was very thoughtful about making his decision. He knew he was going to be pretty well isolated in making it,

so he needed all the strength he could summon up to be able to take the step.” So, what did I take away from this story? Three things:

First:.

* If you were born in 1945, the year Jackie signed the contract with the Dodgers, you would be 78 years old.
* So how old would a person born in 1865 have been in 1945?
* About the same distance from 1945 as 1945 was from the end of the Civil War.

Second:

* You can’t watch the news and not hear the word “Radical.” “We can’t do this idea because it’s radical.” “We can’t vote for this candidate because they’re radical.”

That made me think about Rev. Beecher in 1865. At that time, supporting the Underground Railroad was **radical**.

Branch Rickey standing up for Charles Thomas in 1903 was **radical**. Branch Rickey signing Jackie Robinson to a contract in 1945 was **radical**.

Can you think of any issues that we’re talking about today, that are considered **radical**, that 80 years from now will be considered normal?

Third:

* The words of John Wesley resonate with me:

“Do all the good you can, By all the means you can, In all the ways you can, In all the places you can, At all the times you can, To all the people you can, As long as ever you can.”