

## **AN EXTRAORDINARY LIFE: JACKIE ROBINSON**

2 Corinthians 4:7-16a

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Three hundred years before Jesus, the Greek philosopher Aristotle said, “We become what we do.” The practices of our daily lives form our character. We may SAY we want to be certain kinds of people, but even the best intentions won’t get us there. It is only the things we actually DO that make us who we are. The five extraordinary people we are profiling in this series became that way because they combined their values with wise choices, determination, hard work and persistence. They lived their faith, day by day, week by week, year by year.

When you read a biography, you become aware that none of us become who we are by ourselves. We are shaped by the people around us. Jackie Robinson was influenced primarily by three people. The first was his mother, a woman of exceptional courage. A black woman in Georgia in 1920, she decided to leave a dangerous region and an abusive husband. She took their five children and boarded a train to California. They settled in Pasadena where things were better but far from perfect. Mallie Robinson found a job and became part owner of a home. Neighbors tried to force her to move. They burned a cross in the front yard, but that neither scared Mallie away nor forced her to restrict her children to the house and the yard. Fearful of blacks wandering freely, neighbors then called the police to report on the travels of the Robinson children. One of the neighbors even told the police that his wife was so afraid of blacks that she had not come out of their house since the Robinson family had moved into the neighborhood. When the white

police officer passed this troubling news on to Mallie, she replied ever defiantly, “I’m afraid she’ll be in that house a lifetime.”

Living in the house at 121 Pepper Street, as far as Mallie was concerned, was nothing less than God’s will for her life. “Take one step towards God, and he’ll take two towards you” was one of her favorite expressions, and in her mind she had taken that one step when she had purchased the house. She trusted and had confidence in God and believed in overcoming evil with good. The white residents of Pepper Street eventually accepted the Robinson family because Mallie always responded generously to their own economic needs as they arose.

Mallie not only taught her children faith, she taught them to have pride and self-esteem. Under Mallie’s spiritual guidance, Jackie grew proud of the color of his skin believing that God had intentionally created him black and that his blackness was no reason for shame. Mallie insisted that her children attend the local Methodist church. In his adolescent years, Jackie rebelled and told his mother that he could be a decent person without showing up for Sunday morning worship. But Mallie would have none of it. “If you plant a crop and don’t cultivate it, nothing grows,” she said to him. “That’s the way with religion; it dries up if you don’t tend it.”

Jackie was an outstanding athlete at the integrated John Muir Technical High School, but outside of school life was a constant struggle. He was denied entry into the YMCA, movie theaters, restaurants and businesses. Local whites enjoyed cheering for him on the sports fields and courts, but many could still not stomach the thought of admitting him to other shared public spaces. His older brother Mack placed second to Jesse Owens in the 200-meter dash at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Using him as an example,

Jackie channeled his anger at Jim Crow laws into sports, excelling at football, track, basketball, baseball and tennis, then entered Pasadena Junior college. During those years, he met the second person to influence his faith. A young new minister arrived at the Scott Methodist Church. The Rev. Karl Downs sought out Jackie and the two became friends, playing golf together, and discussing faith and life together. Downs became nationally known as a writer and speaker, and faith began to register for Jackie, not only as a personal matter, but as a social force capable of making one's local community, and the wider world, a better place. Soon he transferred to UCLA and became the first person ever there to earn four athletic letters: in football, basketball, baseball and track. It was also at UCLA that he met his future wife, Rachel, also active in her church.

Jackie Robinson was drafted in the US Army in 1942 and was sent first to Fort Riley, Kansas, where he found out that racism was alive and well in the military at the time. In 1944 he was sent to Fort Hood, just outside Waco, Texas. There may have been no other military bases more segregated and surrounded by towns more hostile to black soldiers than Fort Hood. Black soldiers lived in the least desirable section of the camp and faced Jim Crow conditions. When World War II ended, Jackie Robinson met the third person to have a significant influence on his life, a white man, one who - like Robinson - grew up going to a Methodist church, practicing a faith that shaped every decision he made.

Wesley Branch Rickey was given his first name, Wesley, in honor of the founder of Methodism. His middle name, "branch", came from two Bible verses. He started his baseball career as the coach of the baseball team at Ohio Wesleyan. There was one black player on the team, Charles Thomas, known as Tommy. When Ohio Wesleyan played the University Kentucky at Lexington during the spring of 1903, some of the Kentucky players

and fans began yelling racial epithets at him. Rickey, who was then 21, reportedly ran across the field to the Kentucky dugout and shouted at the opposing coach, "We won't play without him!" No one knows if this story is true, but Branch Rickey told it throughout his life. During a road trip to the University of Notre Dame that spring, Thomas was turned away at the hotel where the team was staying. The hotel manager said Thomas could only stay if he was a servant. So Rickey asked if Thomas could stay on a cot in his room. That night, Rickey saw Thomas rubbing his skin, tearfully saying, "If only I could make my skin white." Rickey says that incident was seared into his memory and made him determined to do something about racial prejudice. He and Thomas remained lifelong friends and Rickey once told a reporter, "I cannot face my God much longer knowing that His black creatures are held separate and distinct from His white creatures in the game that has given me all I can call my own."

Branch Rickey was the president of the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1945 when he decided to sign Jackie Robinson as the first black player in Major League Baseball. The two met in Rickey's office and talked more about Jesus than baseball. Rickey made Robinson promise that he would turn the other cheek when faced with the inevitable hostility of racism. Jackie Robinson married Rachel, began the habit of praying every single day, and faced hatred I cannot describe in this sermon. His minor league career was in Montreal. "Canadians regarded me as a United States citizen who happened to have a colored skin," Robinson said. "Some of my fellow Americans, especially in Baltimore, regarded me as an obscenity, a savage little above the level of a jungle beast, and told me so in vile language." Pitchers threw repeatedly at his head, base runners slid into him with their cleats high, vulgarity were directed at him from opposing players and spectators alike.

Things didn't improve when he made the major leagues. The first week, the Dodgers played in Philadelphia. Philadelphia manager Ben Chapman, originally from Alabama, was a former major-league outfielder who had been traded from the New York Yankees to the Washington Senators in the 1930s after making Nazi salutes at what he perceived to be Jewish fans at Yankee Stadium. Chapman directed a series of hate-filled, bigoted taunts against Robinson as soon as he stepped into the batter's box. "Hey, why don't you go back to the cotton field where you belong? Hey, snowflake, which one of those white boys' wives are you dating tonight?" The rest I cannot and will not repeat.

Robinson did not move from the batter's box. He wanted to ignore his promise to Rickey. But he honored it. He did not look at the Phillies' dugout. He began winning over many in the crowd, and many of his own teammates.

But bigotry trailed him like a curse. He didn't know where or how it would rear itself next. His teammates kept their distance, some because they didn't want him on their team and others because they didn't know what to say to him. One reporter described Robinson as "the loneliest man I have seen in sports."

He faced the possibility of a brutal injury every time he stepped into the batter's box or took his position in the field. But he kept playing, and playing well. He was one of those athletes who had the ability to make those around him better.

The great writer and great human being Maya Angelou talks about facing many defeats but not being defeated, which is the gist of our scripture passage for today. In August of 1947, the first-place Dodgers played the second-place Cardinals. In the 5th inning, Enos Slaughter, a native of North Carolina whose nickname was "Country", came down hard on Robinson's ankle with his spikes. The spikes barely missed Robinson's

Achilles tendon. Slaughter denied intentionally trying to hurt Robinson. But Robinson didn't believe him. Neither did his teammates, the sportswriters or those in the crowd, including Douglas Wilder, then 16. Wilder, who went on to become Virginia's first black governor, said he learned an important lesson as he watched Robinson, writhing in pain, rise to his feet to complete the game. "I will show you I can rise over and above," Robinson's actions said to Wilder. "It's a matter of saying, you will not prevent me from being the man I am. It was a tremendous lesson." Jackie Robinson had a phenomenal baseball career from which he retired in 1956. In his latter years he became more politically and socially involved, during the tumultuous times of the Viet Nam War and the Civil Rights movement.

Guided by his faith, he spoke up against anti-Semitism. On Christmas Eve of 1959, two young German men vandalized a synagogue and nearby Holocaust memorial with swastikas and anti-Semitic slogans. Robinson said, "This revival of Hitlerism, with its swastika smears on the walls of synagogues, Jewish places of business and even private homes, is but another symptom of rabid sickness in our society. Since every one of us is a member of some vulnerable minority...none of us is safe once group-hate is unleashed against any other."

Jackie and Rachel raised their children in Connecticut where they became active in a UCC congregation. In 1963, he accepted the churchmanship award at the UCC General Synod meeting. He was honored for his Christian commitment of time, energy and skill in the struggle for social justice. Members of the synod gave Robinson a standing ovation, and he told this story in his speech: "There was once a young boy who tried to attend Sunday School at a church across the street from his home, but an usher denied him en-

trance, telling him that the church was for whites only. The little boy was terribly disappointed, so disappointed that he sat down on the church step and began to cry. But then God came along and asked the little boy why he was crying. 'I'm crying because these mean people won't let me into their church.' the boy replied. Ladies and gentlemen, Robinson continued, 'do you know what God did? God sat right down at the little boy's side and started to cry too. God said, "that's one church I've been trying to get into for many, many years."

Jackie Robinson praised the UCC for its forthright stance and its commitment to the struggle for racial justice.

Throughout his lifetime, Jackie Robinson's strength in the face of threats and obscenities demonstrated his Christian faith. He believed that God was on his side, fighting for equality. He prayed nightly, trusting God as his constant companion. It was his faith that gave him the ability to practice redemptive suffering on the baseball diamond, turning the other cheek in the face of viciousness. It was his faith that carried him not only through the torment of integrating the major leagues but also through the difficult years of advancing civil rights after he left the baseball diamond. It was for him a source of inspiration and motivation, comfort and strength, wisdom and direction. It kept him, as our passage for today says, from losing heart.

The personal challenges of our lives can break us or make us stronger. Practicing our faith prepares us to take on the injustices of our time with energy and resilience.

The source for this sermon is Jackie Robinson: A Spiritual Biography, by Michael G. Long and Chris Lamb.