

This Happened in My Office

The coffee June makes at home is better than the tasteless brew Wendell makes at the office, but he likes drinking his second cup while standing at my third-floor window. When the magnolia trees bloom the garden turns Advent/Lent purple. He can see the Brooklyn Bridge from the bathroom window, though new buildings are threatening to get in the way. Dr. Fifield came to be the Senior Minister at Plymouth Church just before World War II began. Holding a congregation together through a global conflict is hard. Church is easier now that the war is over, but being a minister is complicated when things are changing, and things are changing rapidly.

Wendell is a thoughtful preacher who carefully chooses every word. He is a manuscript preacher whose scripts often make their way into the newspaper. Wendell spends more hours in his office than preachers who act like a lack of preparation is a virtue. He loves being at Plymouth because every once in a while, there is a holy moment.

Dr. Fifield is at his desk laboring over next Sunday's text when there's a knock at the door.

"Good morning, Wendell."

"Hey, Branch, what can I do for you?"

"I was in the sanctuary, but I wasn't getting anywhere. Can I hang out in your office?"

"I have a lot of work to do."

"Don't let me interrupt. I don't need to talk," Rickey says as he barges in. "I just need to think. You won't even know I'm here. Do you mind?"

Branch Rickey, Sr., the General Manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, paces around the office. In spite of his promise, there is never a moment when Wendell does not know he is there. The minister works quietly. Rickey paces enthusiastically, stopping only to peer out the window. They share 45 minutes of silence, pacing, stopping, silence, pacing, and stopping.

Branch breaks the silence, "I've got it."

"Got what?"

"I've decided to sign Jackie Robinson!"

Rickey sits for the first time: "This is a decision so complex, so far-reaching, fraught with so many pitfalls but filled with so much good, if it was right, that I just had to work it out in this room with you. I had to talk to God about it and be sure what God wanted me to do. I hope you don't mind."

Branch straightens his bow tie, dons his worn hat, and says, "Bless you, Wendell."

Jackie Robinson begins with the Dodgers' minor league affiliate Montreal Royals, a setting with less overt racism. In 1946, Robinson hits .349 for the Royals, scores 113 runs and steals 40 bases in 124 games. He is in Brooklyn as the next season starts. A journalist tells Rickey that "all hell will break loose" when Robinson takes the field for the first time as a Dodger. Branch counters, "I believe all heaven will rejoice." Robinson wins the Rookie of the Year Award and goes on to be elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Wendell assumes his conversation with Rickey is private, so he does not share it with anyone. But after Rickey dies, Wendell decides that the world should hear about the holy moment that happened in my office, so he tells his wife. In 1966, June writes an essay for the Plymouth Church newsletter, "Branch Rickey's Day of Decision."

Who knows how the story would have unfolded without this church, this

minister, or this office?

I pour a second cup of coffee into my thermos and take it to the office. I like to look out my third-floor window and listen to the preschoolers playing in the garden. If I stand on the toilet in the bathroom, I can see the top of the Brooklyn Bridge peeking out over a row of buildings.

I have been the Senior Minister at Plymouth Church for six years that include two years of Covid. Church is more complicated during a plague. The world is changing fast.

I love being at Plymouth, because every once in a while, there is a holy moment. So far nothing as newsworthy as integrating baseball, but I think about Wendell. I sit at my desk looking for the right words. People come to hang out and pray. We ask God to help us make the right decisions. We look for ways to include victims of prejudice. We try to be part of the hard, good things God is doing.

Things like that happen in my office.

Brett Younger



Dr. L Wendall Fifield



*Jackie Robinson
and Branch Rickey, Sr.*