

“Don’t Worry God, I’ll Defend Your Honor!” Acts 7:55-60 Saint Marks UMC,
Charleston WV.

5th SUNDAY OF EASTER (May 18) 2014

⁵⁵ But filled with the Holy Spirit, [Stephen] gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.⁵⁶ “Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” ⁵⁷ But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸ Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died.

It’s only about a 45 second clip in a 2 hour movie. But for me it was the most powerful part of a very powerful movie.

The movie is entitled "42." 42 was the number on Jackie Robinson's uniform. The movie is about the time when Jackie Robinson was the first to cross the color line in Major League Baseball.

It is 1:40:30 into the movie. The day is June 21, 1947, at Crosley Field, in Cincinnati. The camera zooms in on a father and his (looks to be) 10 year old son in the stands.

10 year old son: How many times do you think Peewee’s going to score today (referring to his hero, PeeWee Reese.)

Dad: I remember one time when I was a boy I saw Honus Wagner play and score three times that day. Just have to wait and see.

10 year old son: Wow that would be great!

Jackie Robinson comes out on field, and there is a very loud response from the largely white crowd.

Dad: Hey nigger boy, get the h___ out of Cincinnati. We don’t want you here. Go back to Brooklyn. Hey, Nigger, I’m talking to you. Get the h___ out of Cincinnati. We don’t want you here, boy.

All this while, the 10 year old boy is watching his dad, and listening to his father’s friends all yelling like his father. He looks frightened and he looks sad. But after a short while, he joins in.

Son: Nigger. We don’t want you here.

Just a few seconds later, during pre-game warmup, Jackie Robinson’s teammate PeeWee Reese comes over and stands beside Robinson, with his

arm around Robinson's shoulders. After a short discussion, **PeeWee Reese** says:

Ain't gonna be a next time. All we've got is right here, right now. Thank you Jackie.

Jackie: What are you thanking me for

PeeWee: I've got family there from Louisville. I need them to know. I need them to know who I am.

[Then, with a smile on his face, **PeeWee** says:] **Maybe tomorrow, we'll all wear 42. They won't be able to tell us apart.**

And while PeeWee Reese is standing there with his arm around Jackie Robinson's shoulder, the movie camera pans back over to the crowd, where we see that 10 year old boy who came to the ball park to see his hero, PeeWee Reese, but PeeWee Reese is standing with his arm around the shoulders of the man his father just taught him to say, "Nigger, we don't want you here." And that 10 year lad looks very confused and ashamed."

Rabbi Saul, we are told in today's scripture reading, stood with the coats at his feet, as he looked on approvingly at those who were stoning to death, the follower of Jesus named Stephen.

This Jesus said He was the Way, the Truth, and the Life. But those who stoned Stephen to death, thought they were doing the will of God, in crushing out this movement that didn't seem to fit in with what their teachings told them was THE Way, THE Truth, and The Life.

There they were stoning Stephen to death, saying, **"Don't Worry God, I'll Defend Your Honor!"**

And as I saw Saul there, and remembered his later encounter with Jesus, while Saul was on the road to Damascus to take care of others of these followers of Jesus, like Stephen had been taken care of. And, as he traveled,

"... suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. [Saul] fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, **"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"** He asked, **"Who are you, Lord?"** The reply came, **"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."** (Acts 9:3-5)

And, as I read that scripture I saw in my mind's eye, Saul being able to see Jesus' arm around the shoulders of Stephen, and Saul's face turning into Paul's face which in that moment looked very much like that little 10 year old boy's face, on, June 21, 1947 -- filled with wonder, confusion, and awe,

when he saw his hero PeeWee Reese put his arm around Jackie Robinson's shoulders.

What IS the Truth, the Way, the Life?

“Don't Worry God, I'll Defend Your Honor!” people have called out, as they **dehumanized, ridiculed, and persecuted** people different from them ... all through history.

Sometimes we have to leave home, in order to be able to see just what we look like. In trips taken to Belfast, Northern Ireland, over and over I recognized, and watched people on our work teams recognize behavior that they were hitherto unable to see among their own friends and family back here in America.

Time and again, we could see people claiming they have THE Way, THE Truth, and THE Life, treating other people in a way that Jesus would NEVER treat anyone. And as we heard them say their equivalent of **“Don't Worry God, I'll Defend Your Honor!”** while they **dehumanized, ridiculed, and persecuted** people who claimed a different path or denomination, it looked very much to us that they didn't seem to be following God's Way, Truth, or Life, not at all ... Not at all.

But it's usually easier to see that in other people than in ourselves.

When I was a sophomore in college and was taking the course “Great Living Religions,” I came home one weekend and asked my home church pastor, who later became the senior pastor here at Saint Marks, two pastors before me. I said to him,

“Frank, here's what I'm learning about these other religions. And THEY all think that THEY are following God's Way, Truth, and Life. Are they all wrong and we are all right? Can't God reach out to different people in different cultures in different ways, and everyone is too proud to admit that somebody else might also receive God's revelation? Are we sure we are the only way?”

And being the wise man that Frank Shaffer was, he scratched his chin and thought a little while before speaking. (You never can tell when you might just say something that will be remembered for 40 years and repeated.) And then he said:

You know, Jesus is ALL I need. And I've spent my whole life following Him and learning all I can about Him. He is all that I need. But, I surely would not tell God that He can't reach out to His children in any way that I don't approve. I'll just leave that to God.”

And I was reminded of the Rabbi Gamaliel, whose story is told on the tear off sheet of your bulletin. He was in the company of the Sanhedrin wanting to punish more of Jesus' disciples. And he gave them this counsel:

I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" (Acts 5:38-39)

As the children are watching us, I ask you to ask yourself these questions:

- **How many prophets have stood in the same place Stephen stood? How many have tried to speak out, to explain things? How many have suffered the same violent kind of response from those who called out "Don't Worry God, I'll Defend Your Honor!"?**
- **How many times have young people like Saul seen it happening? Imitated it?**
- **Where do I see these things being repeated in the world around me today?**
- **Today's scripture provides a classic example of the "CYCLE OF VIOLENCE" -- something with which we are far too familiar. We see it clearly when it occurs in far off places, brought close by radio and television. But, what about in the sacred space of my own self, the violence in my own heart? Can I face with honesty and integrity the truth about myself?**

I dare you, my sisters and brothers, to hear the Word, and to Know the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and then not require all people to find their Way, Truth, and Life along the same path we followed.

Not all paths lead to God, but God will go down just about any path to reach us. (*CrossRoads*, by William Paul Young)

I commend us all to treat every person, even when they differ from our understanding, **with the same kind of Love that Jesus does.**

Let us be about the work of the Kingdom which Jesus showed in all that He did.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
AMEN.