One of the things that is hard to escape in our world today is a strong sense of polarization. No matter what the outcome of the upcoming elections, this isn't going to go away. I certainly feel it with respect to everything from local to national politics, to within the Church, and in so many other aspects of our society. And while it's important to have passion and stand up for what we believe in, admittedly it can be easy to see what separates us far more quickly than what united us.

Up through the Civil Rights movement, in particular racial differences were entrenched in much of our country. Among the most visible was in major league baseball.

Even casual fans of the game know Jackie Robinson was the first to break the color barrier. And most might know that it was very difficult as he dealt with a lot of racism in that first season. Some might also know of his friendship with Pee Wee Reese, the Dodgers shortstop who famously put his arm around his teammate in response to the jeering and racial epithets being hurled his way from the fans in a game against the Reds. But in a store Reese wrote back in the 40s, he gives some insight into the intense divisions that were going on both within the team and elsewhere in society,

and gives some insight into how he started to help people overcome them, not setting out to be any kind of hero. But rather seeing first in Robinson a human being, rather than seeing a person with a different skin color.

He writes that on a hot afternoon in 1945, the news about the first black major league baseball player wasn't the most important thing in his life. He was actually more concerned with filling out a royal flush in the card game some buddies he was playing on a Navy ship headed back to the States from Guam.

Someone hollered at the door, "Hey, Pee Wee, did you hear? The Dodgers signed a" (insert the racial epithet there).

Then the guy added, "and he plays shortstop!"

Pee Wee's head jerked up and he realized the guy was serious.

"Just my luck" was his first thought. "He plays my position."

Reese had been playing shortstop for the Brooklyn Dodgers since 1940 and hade made the All-Star team in 1942 before joining the Navy. Though the black player, whose name was Jackie Robinson, would be playing for the Montreal Royals, a top Dodgers farm team, Reese figured eventually they would be on the field together.

“Oh well” he thought, as he picked up his card. He was confident in his abilities. And if Robinson could beat him out, more power to him. Reese was more concerned about getting home to his wife, Dorothy, and daughter, Barbara, who was only 11 days old when he had left.

Reese admits he did not have any special affection for black people. He had grown up in the small Kentucky town of Ekron, where blacks lived on one side of town and whites on the other. He was sure most of the kids had heard the old Sunday school song: “Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight,” but there wasn’t any mixing, even in the marble games they played. (Pee Wee in fact got his nickname at age 13 from the “peewee” he used as a shooter to play marbles.).

When Reese started playing baseball it was the same: the blacks had their leagues, the whites had theirs. After high school, Reese worked in Louisville as a cable splicer for the phone company and played weekends on the New Covenant Presbyterian Church team. In 1937 they led the church league and got to go to New York to see the Giants and Yankees battle it out in the World Series. A year later he was playing shortstop for the Louisville Colonels and then went to the Dodgers under Leo Durocher. It wasn't until April 11, 1947 when Branch Rickey signed Jackie Roosevelt Robinson to a National League contract with the Dodgers that Reese was directly affected.

He admits he does not remember shaking a black man's hand before, but on that spring training day, he walked over to Jack and as captain, welcomed him to the team. He knew he had something going on when he saw him bat and throw.

Not everyone though wanted to shake Robinson's hand. And not all were happy about their new teammate. Late one night while Reese and teammate Pete Reiser were talking in his hotel room there was a knock on the door. He opened it to find outfielder Dixie Walker and two others. He

handed Reese a petition stating those who had signed wouldn't play baseball with a black man. Reese responded by saying he would not sign it, and Reiser said the same. That was that.

Looking back on that moment, Reese said he was not trying to think of himself as being the Great White Father. He needed the salary, and he just wanted to play the game. It didn't matter to Reese he says whether Jackie was black or green; he had a right to be there too.

It turned out Jackie did not play shortstop. Reese stayed in that slot and eventually Jackie played second base. They got to be a kind of partnership; a sportswriter called them "one of the brightest double-play combinations in baseball." Reese observed a team has to be strong up the middle if they are going to win pennants, and they did just that, winning pennant after pennant.

It wasn't easy for Jackie though. During that first year, after Reese played cards with Jackie in the clubhouse, Dixie Walker came up to him. "How can you be playing cards with him" he asked.

“Look, Dixie,” Reese said. “You and Stell travel with a black woman who takes care of your kids, who cooks your food, who you trust - isn’t that even more than playing cards with a black man”

“That’s different” he humphed.

“Tell me how,” Reese replied.

Dixie couldn’t come up with anything and walked away.

A lot of other team members did take to Jackie, including Gil Hodges, Ralph Branca and Eddie Stanky. Jackie and Reese developed a kind of rapport. Once while they sat in the dugout he complained to Reese that the pitchers are throwing at him because they’re racists.

Reese said to Jackie with a smile that they were in fact throwing at him because they don’t like the way he its.

Jackie leaned back and gave a long easy chuckle.

Sadly Jackie did take a lot of guff on the field. Reese writes there was one time when he didn't see how any human could stand what he was taking. It was on their first road trip. In Cincinnati, the heckling from the fans became brutal. It was more than boos and jeering; the whole stadium seemed to be in a bellowing frenzy. Then somebody threw out a black cat, which scampered across the field.

Reese looked over at Jackie standing alone, looking so sad and vulnerable. He says something in his gut reacted. Maybe he was thinking of the hanging tree in Brendenburg, a little town near Ekron. Reese remembered his dad pointing to a long branch and telling him black men had been lynched from it. As a little boy it made a terrible impression on Reese that people would do things like that just on account of skin color. Something about the unfairness of it all, the injustice; what, Reese can't say. But he did step over to the pitcher, called time out and walked over to Jackie. He said something consoling, then reached up, put his hand on his shoulder, and stood there and looked at the crowd.

The jeering stopped like someone turning off a loud radio. And they began doing what they had gone there to do, play ball.

Reese closes by saying Robinson went on to greatness. He would turn the other cheek, but also stand up for himself. He could be a tough bench jockey, and sliding into base he might plow into a guy who was in his way.

When Reese saw talented black athletes later in his life, he says he was thankful for having had the privilege of playing with the man who opened the door for them. But Reese says none of them were trying to put on a show. Rather they were trying to simply use the talent God had given them.

One of Reese's last talks with Jackie wrapped it all up. He said to Jackie "You know, I didn't go out of my way to be nice to you." Jackie grinned and said "Pee Wee, maybe that's what I appreciated most."

Reese admits he wasn't trying to be some hero, but his actions illustrate something important: namely in unity. In his case, he as he said a person could be green for all he cared, but if they could play baseball well, they deserved a spot on the team. His actions helped removed the veil of racism. Not completely of course. But the fans at Crosley Field in Cincinnati and the players on the Dodgers who didn't want Jackie there at least

thought more deeply about what was in their heart. And through his actions, Reese helped people to begin to see, even if not quite 20/20, the dignity of the human person and how we are all children of the same God.

In the first reading, we hear that Isaiah has the mountain of the Lord, where the veil that veils all peoples, the web woven over the nations, is destroyed. The love is freely given to all; and all clearly see.

In the Gospel with the parable of the wedding feast, the king, who stands for God the Father; the son of the king stands for Jesus Christ who is the bridegroom. Christ, like a bridegroom entering into marriage, comes to restore our original dignity, overcoming what separates us. He is the source of true unity. We celebrate this at Mass; a foreshadow of heaven. All are invited to come to the wedding. So why would anyone not want to come?

In real life, some don't come because they don't bother to open the invitation. They make no time for God. They never understand how much God loves them; or they fail to see why Mass matters so much. But even when we pray or go to church, it's not as if this is a magic wand kind of thing. Faith requires a response; we have to work at removing the veil. And

among the veils in our eyes can be intolerance, hate, racism, where we view the other as a threat rather than through the eyes of God. How then do we try to achieve greater unity in a world that can be so divided?

I think as a starter, think of the word “all” in our first reading: “the Lord of hosts will provide for all peoples a feast.” When we hone in on that word, it prevents us from becoming like the chief priests in the Gospel who think that salvation is exclusive. The love God has for us is equal, it’s just some respond to that in a different way. So once we can train ourselves to see others as a human being first, it can be a stepping stone towards all that we do towards that person.

With respect towards others we disagree with, what can sometimes help is seeking the common goals looking at what links, rather than separates. Whether we are talking about politics or differences of opinion in the workplace or the parish or the family, when we can get past having to do it one way only, what we might find is that we can work together for the common good. Now this isn’t to say we throw out our principles; some things we never compromise on. But it does mean that if we can get past

our egos, there is a lot we can cooperate on. Pride though can be a major veil, obstructing us from seeing God and the gifts of others.

Listening is also an important part of true growth. These days it's harder than ever; particularly with social media where it's just us and a keyboard or our iphone, it's quick to spout of opinions and go back and forth bickering with people in a sentence or two. It's why in spirituality, silence is so important. Sometimes in mediation or silent reflection, we can hear God's voice speaking to us. With others, words and actions can help so much. Listening to someone, we can get a sense for what they might be really saying behind the words or what is on their soul; we can get a better understanding what it's like to walk in their shoes. Maybe it caused those people in the stadium to think for a moment in the silence of a few seconds when Reese put his arm around Robinson; or maybe it caused Dixie Walker to think about why he believed the way he did that day in a clubhouse. This also includes listening to our conscience; when we have time for reflection we can see places in our lives where we want to make changes and grow.

Prayer is also a big help in trying to achieve greater unity. Sometimes when we listen to our conscience, we'll realize there is racism in our heart. Or that we really are so angry at people of a political party or group or religion that it crosses over from disagreement to hate. Rather than trying to pretend that these things aren't there, it's far better to confront them. We are reminded of Jesus doing this every time we gaze upon a crucifix. Through prayer, we can ask God to help us move past these feelings. We can pray for those with whom we disagree too.

You also might look for things that augment these feelings in your heart and eliminate them from your life. I have to admit, the past couple of years I've become a Twitter addict. But after the elections are over, I plan on deleting the app from my phone. I may keep my account up but go to it far less often. Every time I find myself on Twitter, I find myself getting angry or upset about things or towards certain people. Sometimes cable news in our non stop cycle can do this too. It's good to share and read opinions, but if you are finding some sites, channels or even people you associate with are always bringing you down to get angry and miserable and irritable, why not eliminate these things from your life?

Lastly, with respect to how we can be separated, sometimes it's not politics or differences that separate, but just choices we make to be separated from others. Think of Harry Chapin's song "Cat's in the Cradle"; the father never has time for the son because he's perpetually busy, and the son becomes the father. Real life is like that. We can become too busy to see people, or forget about what matters most. Hopefully one thing Covid has enlightened us about is a text or virtual conversation is no substitute for the real thing. Human contact matters; it's why Reese's embrace of Robinson did so much. So we need to think about that important gift of time, and realize when you have dinner with family, face-to-face conversations, visit loved ones once it's considered more safe to go back and have closer contact, and actively volunteer like so many at our parish do at festivals, in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, on our youth mission trips and at Fr. Hoppenjans' parish of Saint Michael in Paintsville, Kentucky, these actions and our gifts of time do so much to show we care.

Unfortunately in our world, original sin has created a lot of veils that prevent us from seeing God, but also prevent us from loving one another as we should. In God, there are not different sections of the city as there were in Pee Wee Reese's native town of Ekron. But while one tree in that town

symbolized the power of hate, it's also clear that as a Christian, another tree for Reese inspired him as a symbol of love. For the rest of our lives that we walk this earth, there will be division. Some of it is healthy; and it's certainly important to stand up for our values, and to articulate our faith. It's also OK to not like someone's actions, and to speak out. For cowardice is also a sin. But we should not confuse fortitude with foolish pride and wrath either. For the wedding feast is one to which all are invited. So may we strive at making sure as many as possible put on their wedding garment and make it there, rather than working to exclude others from entering the hall, remembering that God's love is freely given and meant to unite, not separate. Wrath, anger and intolerance are some of the biggest veils we have going on now in our world that prevent us from seeing and articulating that love. Let us pray as we receive Holy Communion that God can help us remove them, as we work toward building one another up rather than tearing one another down.