



Reflections from the Fairway

Deuteronomy 6:4-11

One of the things about living in the city where you attended college is it is filled with the places that bring back rich memories. Driving on East College, I look at the parking lot of the Wesley Center. That is where the old Baptist Student Center used to stand, the place where I met Sally. At one time in our university career, Sally was the secretary and I was the janitor. I drive by Dorm 16 and remember my first year away from home. During my first week living in Dorm 16 there was a massive streaking party outside my new home. The party was so out of the ordinary that it was reported by Paul Harvey the next day. Driving by the intramural fields I recall playing flag football and softball. Then I drive by the little house on Banita Street where I lived for two years with some of my closest lifelong friends.

In a similar way, it is important to search for items in our everyday experience that remind us of our faith. For example, in the text that was read from James, it appears that James can look at the waves that are blown and tossed by the wind and realize this is the way he feels when he allows his doubts rather his faith to control his actions.

I love our opening hymn, "Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise." Walter Smith, using the words found in Timothy and the Old Testament, thought about the justice of God and wrote, "Thy justice like mountains, high soaring above." I wonder how many of us when we look at the mountain peaks think of God's perfect justice when compared to human justice. Or, looking to the clouds and remember as rain falls from the clouds so God's blessings fall upon us.

And of course Jesus was the master of using everyday articles to call our attention to the Kingdom of God. "Look at the mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds, yet it becomes the biggest plant; you know the Kingdom of God is like that." Or as the baker kneads yeast into the dough, the Kingdom of God permeates the world.

The disciples were fishermen, and talking about fishing, Jesus says, look at your net, you catch all types of fish: trout, bass and alligator gars, and as the fisherman keeps the good fish and throws out the bad ones, so it is in the Kingdom of God. I bet that for the rest of their lives when the disciples saw a mustard plant, or a baker kneading dough, or fish in a net, they thought about Jesus' teaching.

To look at common things in life and using them to remind us of the Kingdom of God is a great discipline. Last Sunday, we celebrated the Lord's Supper, and used the common elements of bread and wine to remind us of the broken body of Jesus and the blood that was shed on the cross for our salvation.

I learned this discipline when I served as an Associate Pastor in Abilene. There was a group called the Ballet Magnificat who performed a beautiful program of Ballet to Christian music. The church I served sponsored the ballet group and we filled the civic center.

One of the dancers, Rick Focheaux, loved to play golf so I took him to the public golf course and he taught me this wonderful lesson. As we were about to tee off on the second hole, he said, "You know, I enjoy, in whatever I do, to look for symbols that remind me of my relationship with Jesus." I had never thought of that, but that is what he did for the next 17 holes.

You may remember me preaching a sermon which was titled, "The Theology of Baseball." Well, today I want to take us to the golf course and consider that infuriating game that I will never master, but hopefully glean from it some great spiritual lessons.

As I do this, I want to stress that the purpose of this sermon is to challenge each of us to see if we can relate aspects of our favorite pass-times, whatever it may be, to our Christian faith. If by chance you have never played golf, and never plan to in the future, I am certain that in fishing, canoeing, rafting, sewing, tennis, volleyball, basketball, gardening, photography, woodworking, ceramics or painting, whatever your hobby is, you can find principles or rules that remind you of the Christian faith.

Let me show you what I mean as I share several things golf teaches me about Christian faith and practice.

First, in golf you are supposed to keep your cool. Never lose your temper, and never throw your clubs, especially into the water. It does not matter how many tee shots end up in the lake, don't throw your clubs in the lake with them. There was the gentleman in Mt. Pleasant who was so disgusted with himself he not only threw his driver in the lake, he threw his entire golf bag into the lake. The problem came when he got back to his car and remembered where his keys were.

If you are going to be a good golfer, you have to control your frustration and your anger, and to be a disciple of Jesus Christ you also have to control your anger. Jesus said in Matthew 5:21-22, **“You have heard it was said to the people of old, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment.”**

I remember playing with Rick F. and he said on the second hole at the Abilene public golf course, “Steve, the foundation to your golf game begins with a grip on the golf club.” He said that as he hit a perfect drive down the middle of the fairway. “A good grip is the foundation to my golf game, and when it comes to my life, faith in Jesus Christ is the foundation.” That knowledge usually does not keep me from hitting the ball into the water or into the jungle, but it is a reminder of something much more important than a perfect golf shot; it is a reminder that Jesus is my Lord. The Apostle Paul

wrote in First Thessalonians 3:11, **“For no other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”** Trials will come. There are storms out there like hurricanes with our names on them. Tee shots will go into the water or sand traps or out into snake country. Our lives will be filled with tragedy and difficulty, but if Jesus and his word is your foundation, if you grip Jesus with all your heart, then you will stand the storms. Remember the words of Jesus, “The house build on sand will fall, but a house build on the rock of my word will stand.”

I have also learned from my reflections that we have to be willing to put down the inner self that would tempt us to stray from God’s path. Preparing to hit the tee shot of a five par hole, there is the temptation to rare back with the driver and hit the ball as hard as I can. It is an almost irresistible urge. It does not matter what my brain is trying to tell my body, but somewhere between the back swing and hitting the ball, something takes over my body and I swing with all my might. And with all my might I hit a chunk of sod about fifty feet down the fairway while the ball is rolling about 20 feet off the T-box.

Like the golfer who bragged to his caddy, you see this four par, all it takes is a drive and a putt. The golfer swung with all his might to prove his point. He sent the sod flying but the ball only rolled about two feet from the tee. His caddy then pulled out the golfer’s putter and said, “Boy, this will be some putt.”

To be successful in our mission as a church we have to flee from the temptations that come from our inner self and do what we know to be right. Nobody hits a golf ball better than the person who keeps a smooth consistent swing. The urge is there to hit the ball as hard as humanly possible. The temptations to sin are strong, but we must resist and work on a consistent walk with Jesus Christ.

Another lesson to learn from golf is that even if you keep a smooth steady swing there are still traps to avoid. In our Christian walk with Christ

we must be aware that when we are walking with Jesus Christ there are traps in front us.

In First Peter 5:8-9 we read, **“Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.”** We must be wise in our Christian practice, always watchful for the traps in our path.

How many times have I heard, “Steve you will be more successful if you keep your head down and your eye on the ball!” I understand that when Jack Nicholas was learning the game, his instructor stood in front of him, grabbed his hair, and held his head down, forcing Jack Nicholas to look only at the ball. With his eyes fixed on the ball and nowhere else, the instructor told Nicholas to hit the ball. The truth taught here is if you don’t keep your eye on the ball it will lead to disaster, and when a Christian takes his or her eyes off Jesus Christ then there are going to be problems. You are going to lose your temper, you are going to hurt someone, you are going to forget your commitment to the work of Christ. If your desire is to honor God, then don’t take your eye off Jesus Christ. This is the most important lesson from the game of golf. As the golfer is to keep his or her eyes focused on the ball we are to keep our lives focused on Jesus Christ. Keep him in your thoughts. Focus on his love and his will. Keep on the narrow path. And that is the point of this sermon: find those constant reminders in your daily life that remind you of Jesus’ presence.

I know to keep my eyes on the ball, but what I normally do just before I strike the ball is to look up to see where it is going, and to my disgust the ball rolls toward the sand trap. But there is grace in golf. If you have taken your eyes off the ball and end up in the trees, just chip your next shot back on the fairway; that is, make the best out of your situation and do better next time. As with your walk with the Lord, don’t get too down on yourself, but confess your sins and remember that God is faithful and just and when we confess our sins he will forgive. We can make a clean start because of the love of Jesus

Christ. So if you are feeling disappointment, or you feel dirty inside, remember you are a child of God, you are forgiven, so get back on the fairway and remember again to make Jesus your focus.

There are many lessons from game of golf, but let me mention one more, there is a goal on every hole. The goal is to get that little ball in the hole that is in the green at the end of the fairway. The last time I played golf there was a hole where my tee shot went 30 yards. My second shot went about 30 yards. My third shot took off and I had to walk at least 45 yards to get to it. It took ten strokes to get to the green, but each time I was closer. There was that one shot off the tree that bounced back the wrong direction, but in general I was closer, but by the grace of God I made it to the green and eventually seven putts later the ball went into the hole.

We have a goal, which is summed up in two words: Jesus Christ. May each day bring us closer to him. Even if you never get on a golf course may you learn a little more of Christ's love today and more tomorrow, and even more the next day so that one day you will reach your goal and enjoy the prize of knowing Christ when he presents you in the presence of the Father saying, **"Well done, my good and faithful servant; enter into the kingdom prepared for you."**

Now I hope you don't go home and tell your neighbors that you preacher only talked about golf today. My objective was to talk about Jesus Christ and our relationship with him. What I talked about was finding Christian symbols in our everyday life that remind us of who we are and how to reach our goal.

This sermon is to challenge us to develop symbols and actions from our everyday experience that remind us of Jesus Christ and his grace. Whether it is sewing, where you concentrate on the stitches as you should concentrate on Christ; or, tennis, where you also have to watch a ball, or skiing, or boating, or biking, or playing bridge, no matter what you do, **be a theologian**, and go so far as to write down those things you do and how they symbolize the Christian

life. You will, as I did, have to stretch a bit, but maybe, just maybe, you will become more conscious of Jesus Christ in your everyday living.

It was beautiful day in Beirut, Lebanon in May 1984, when a car pulled up beside Benjamin Weir. Rev. Weir was a Presbyterian missionary serving in that country, and on that fateful day Benjamin was grabbed by four men, bound and gagged and thrown onto the floorboard of the car. He was captured by the fundamentalist group that later was organized into Hezbollah. Rev. Weir would spend the next sixteen months in captivity, as the fundamentalist group wanted to use him as bait in their attempt to blackmail arms from our nation.

On the day of his capture, Rev. Weir was taken to an abandoned building, where he was chained to a radiator and isolated from the rest of the world. At that point he did not know if he would live or die. Yes, he was frightened, as any of us would be.

You have probably heard his story, but the first thing he did after he was chained to the radiator was to look around the room, which was void of furniture. All he had was a mat on the floor by the radiator. In the ceiling of the room were three wires that hung down from the spot where a light fixture once hung. He used those three wires to remind him of the presence of the Trinity and as they reached down he imagined the hand of God coming to comfort him in his time of need.

As time passed, every Saturday he would keep a morsel of bread from his dinner, and use it on Sunday morning as he remembered the liturgy of the Lord's Supper, as he celebrated in that isolated room the sacrament that churches around the world celebrated with him, and he remembered that churches all over the world were praying for him.

Do you understand how he kept his sanity? Do you understand where his comfort came from during those trying days? He had developed what I want each one of us to develop; that is, the conscious ability to see in our

everyday surroundings reminders of God, of God's love, our commitment to Christ, and the presence of God with us.

Our text today is Deuteronomy 6:4-9. It is one of the better known passages from the pages of the Old Testament. In it we are told to do everything we can to remember the words of the law of God's love in our hearts. Hear the challenge to remember God and his word wherever you are and in whatever activity you participate.

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. Amen.