



LAKEWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH:
Rev. Terence A. Lucarelli
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I WAS GOLFING AND ONE DAY IT JUST HIT ME
Galatians 5:1, 6b; 13-25

Let me begin by confessing that I once lost my sole on the golf course. Fortunately, my shoe manufacturer gave me a full refund.



Golf is a hobby for many, a sport for some, and an addiction for a few. Into the latter category falls a man I heard about recently. It seems he teed up his ball on the sixth hole of his favorite course, hooked his drive terribly, and ended up in an unplayable position. Between where his ball landed and the green began was a barn ... a rather large barn. But his wife, playing with him, assessed his predicament and then suggested: "Look, why don't you go for it? You'll never hit it over the barn, but you might be able to hit through it. I'll open the barn's front door. Then I'll walk through and open the barn's back door. When I wave, you take out a two iron, smack it hard, keep it low, and you may luck out."

So she proceeded to open the barn's front door, walked through and opened the barn's rear door, and then gave a wave, indicating that the time had come to hit. Seeing the signal, he took out his two iron, rocketed a shot through the barn doors, and hit his wife upside the head, killing her instantly.

Three years later, while playing with a friend, he hooked the same drive on the same hole, landing in virtually the same spot. Upon surveying the predicament, his friend said: "Look, why don't you go for it? This barn has two doors. I'll open the front. Then I'll walk through and open the back. When you see me wave, take out a two iron and whack it with everything you've got."

"No way," said the golfer. "The last time I tried that on this hole, I took a six."

Someday, someone will explain to me why so many stories about golf are also stories about death. I can think of at least three classic jokes that combine the two. Rather than tell them, I'll simply call them to mind by reciting the punch lines ... undeniably you golfers will know the jokes:

"The good news is that there are great golf courses in heaven. The bad news is that you have a tee time tomorrow morning."

"Why wouldn't I interrupt my round to pay my last respects? After all, she gave me the best 30 years of my life."

(And who can forget the immortal:) "I'll tell you why it took me eight hours to play 18 holes. I had to hit the ball and drag Fred ... hit the ball and drag Fred."

Humor has a way of illuminating a lot of things, not the least of which is the way we tend to get our priorities all screwed up, playing away at "life's little games" while life's most significant relationships take it in the head. That's not the primary point of my sermon this morning, but if it happens to fit your particular situation, feel free to use it anyway you like.

Before I get to that main point, note that this story could never have been told if that golfer hadn't strayed from the fairway. Now, I realize that there are probably a few non-golfers among us this morning, so I suppose a brief definition of a "fairway" might be in order. When you hit a golf ball, the fairway is where you want your ball to land. The grass is shorter there. The ground is smoother there. And most of the time you have a direct unencumbered shot toward the green (the place where the hole is located ... yeah, that's where you have to put or putt your ball in the hole). Should your ball stray outside the fairway, I suppose it could be said that you've found the

"foulway." And while there is no such word as "foulway" (at least until now), it pretty much sums up the problem. In golfing's lexicon, "straying from the fairway" (interesting choice of verb ... "straying") lands you in the "rough," which (on the more difficult courses) is often described as being "unforgiving." Upon straying into the rough, three ponderables come into play ... all of them BAD.

1. You may not be able to find your ball.
2. You may find it, but not be able to hit it.
3. You may be forced to take a penalty.

Sometimes even worse things happen. I once hit a shot through some lady's kitchen window at 8:30 in the morning. She was nice enough to bring the ball out to me ... in her nightgown. She seemed nice enough, even struck up a conversation so she could learn a little more about me ... such as, my address, my phone number, and the name of my insurance company. Just kidding.

Alright, you probably figured it out by now that I'm playing with the word "fairway" ... using it as a moral metaphor for our lives when we tend to "stray" into the "rough" or "land out of bounds." And the reality is that in life, as in golf, getting out of the "rough" ... the "foulway" ... is sometimes a whole lot easier said than done. And maybe downright unaccomplishable, apart from a little help from our friends.



This is best illustrated by one last golf story ... this is it, I promise. This story is told by a minister about a great golfer, Arnold Palmer, playing in an even greater golf tournament, the Masters at Augusta National. He was following Palmer in the gallery, known in those days as "Arnie's Army." On the 13th hole, Palmer shanked one down along the edge of a creek bed. Here's how he recounts the story:

When I saw where Arnie's ball landed, I said to myself: "No way will he be able to recover for par." So turning to the person next to me, I decided to play strategist: "What Arnie needs to do," I said, "is to play it safe, chip out to the fairway and settle for a bogey. Because if he tries a long iron out of that lie, either he won't get it out, or he'll hit it flat and wind up out-of-bounds on the other side." This observation caused the guy standing next to me to say: "That just shows how much you know. This must be your first trip to the Masters." Then he went on to add: "What Palmer is really going to do is hit the ball as hard as he can. And he won't go out of bounds, because he's going to hit the ball straight at the gallery."

Which is exactly what Palmer did. He slashed the ball straight at the crowd, where somebody who loved him a whole lot more than I did got in front of the ball and let it hit him. There followed a bit of kicking and scuffling. And when the ball stopped, it was right back on the fairway. Whereupon the person standing next to me turned and said: "As long as there's a crowd at Augusta National, Arnold Palmer will never hit it out of bounds at the Masters."

What a wonderful story. It makes me wish I could play with a gallery like that. Heck, it makes me wish I could LIVE with a gallery like that ... a gallery filled with people who would love me enough so that they would do everything in their power to keep my life from going out of bounds. Lots of lives DO ... go out of bounds, that is.



It's been said wisdom comes from experience and experience comes from ... messing up. So I guess that means it's always easier to tell others the right way to do things after you've done them the wrong way for a long time.

Maybe that's why so many awful golfers become such good coaches. Lee Trevino, however, wasn't convinced. Lee always said that he'd get a coach ... if he could find one who could beat him.

Oops ... that was another golf story, wasn't it.



When I was in seminary (wow, that was a long time ago), we used to talk among ourselves, saying we thought it was at least a little strange that professors, who've never been pastors, felt as if they were qualified to tell prospective pastors how to do what they've never done.

I think of Dwight L. Moody who was criticized in a classroom for how he did evangelism. Moody asked his antagonist how he did it. When the young man admitted he didn't do it, Moody remarked, "Well, I prefer the way I DO it to the way you DON'T do it."

Fortunately, experience and education aren't the only paths to enlightenment. Sometimes the truth just seems to come to us out of nowhere. I think of those times as Apocalyptic Moments ... a kind of revelation through what we believe to be Divine Inspiration.



And so, I Was Golfing and One Day It Just Hit Me ... that I'm never going to qualify for the US Open. It doesn't matter how much I practice or how many latest-technology weapons I put in my arsenal. I'm never going to play on the Senior Tour. I'm never going to be the club champion at South Hampton. I'm never going to be play scratch golf.

It was an Apocalyptic Moment that reminded me of a paragraph from Kurt Vonnegut's collection of short stories and speeches, Palm Sunday (1981). This is what he wrote:

An Indianapolis cousin of mine, who was also a high school classmate, did very badly at the University of Michigan while I did badly at Cornell. His father asked him what the trouble was, and he made what I consider an admirable reply: "Don't you know, Father? I'm dumb!" It was the truth.

Everybody is important to God. But God doesn't make everybody capable of doing everything.

Back in seminary for a moment ... In a preaching class, the professor quoted the theologian Karl Barth: "It doesn't matter whether one WANTS to preach. It matters whether one CAN preach." It doesn't matter what we WANT to do. It matters what we CAN do.

★ What I'm trying to say here is that the secret of personal fulfillment is finding out who we are and what we're supposed to do and then embracing ourselves.

Because we tend to daydream too much and some folks around us tend to advise too much, it usually takes an Apocalyptic Moment to figure out who we are and what we're supposed to do.



One Day It Just Hit Me ... that my children didn't really care what I thought about who they are and what they were going to do some day. They have minds of their own. Sure, like most children, I believe both Kerry and Jeremy have grown up to appreciate mom and dad. But the reality is, my words and my ideas for them usually have only come in second best when it comes to them selecting a vocation, spouse, house, and so on. Yes ... Parents can only do their best and leave the rest to you know who.



In How to Play Your Best Golf All The Time (1953), Tommy Armour confirms my contention that golf is a metaphor for life: "When you miss a shot, never think of what you did wrong. Come up to the next shot thinking of what you must do right."

One Day It Just Hit Me ... that goes for husbands and wives too.

One Day It Just Hit Me ... that being a pastor isn't really about being right about God but rather being right WITH God by doing right by people. Or as Paul described the conduct and demeanor of people who have God in their hearts: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

One Day It Just Hit Me ... that being a believer is more about DEEDS than CREEDS. It's hard to figure that out on our own. That's why God's people have always depended upon Apocalyptic Moments ... revelation.

By the way, it isn't necessary to hang out and wait for an out-of-nowhere Apocalyptic Moment. Just open the Bible. You'll be inspired and you'll also figure out if WHAT you're believing and HOW you're behaving are more than just auto-suggestion.

One Day It Just Hit Me ... that all I care to know is that LOVE is the greatest expression of our faith – LOVING God by LOVING people; working for the highest good for others regardless of who, what, where, or when ... without the expectation of ever being loved back.

★ Paul sums it all up for us in that short phrase from our passage today: "...the only thing that counts is faith working through love."

Yes, One Day It Just Hit Me ... that all I really care to know anymore is that LOVE is more important than my house, my car, my score, my handicap, my bank account, my treasures, trinkets, trophies, diplomas, degrees, and all of the other temporal things that will eventually end up in some church's garage sale.

Friends, only LOVE will last: LOVE for God ... LOVE for each other (my family and my church family) ... and the LOVE we share beyond our walls.

Read the Great Commandment again when you get a chance (see Matthew 22:34-40). And remember that along the way, as you follow the One on the Way, there will be many Apocalyptic Moments through which the Spirit shows you the truth about living IN and FOR God.

One Day It Might Just Hit YOU ... that is, if it hasn't already!

Amen and Amen.