

## Life in the Fairway July 7, 2007

You know, golf is a funny, funny game. I wonder, how many of you have ever tried to play golf? How many of you consider yourselves to be avid golfers, or at least play every now and then? Well, for those of you who have never played, or don't play much, I apologize in advance for a message that is all about golf. If you aren't very familiar with golf, let me give a simple explanation that lets you know everything you need to know about golf...Actually Mark Twain said, he said, "*Golf is a good walk spoiled.*"

Or, how about homerun king Hank Aaron who said "*It took me seventeen years to get 3,000 hits in baseball. I did it in one afternoon on the golf course.*"

Then, golfer Ray Floyd said this..."*They call it golf because all the other four letter words were taken.*"

Now, this one doesn't really doesn't have much to do with what we are talking about, it just made me laugh. It came from the TV show Silk Stalkings..."*The people who gave us golf and called it a game are the same people who gave us bag pipes and called it music.*"

Golf is a game I really love and used to play a lot of, and actually got pretty decent. However, lately, I simply haven't had time to play much. In fact, I was trying to remember the last time I played golf and it's been at least two years since I've even hit a ball. To play golf, even really poorly, takes a lot of time. It takes a 4-6 hour commitment to go to the course and play 18 holes. With young kids and school, 4-6 hours is a lot of time. Nonetheless, golf is a game I still love.

As I began to think seriously about this message though, it wasn't the good shots, or the good rounds that make me remember golf so fondly. Rather, it is the friendships I've formed, and the life lessons I've learned that have created such fond memories for me. My dad once said to me that everything I needed to know about life could be learned on the golf course. I believe he was right. And I was reminded of just how true this is as I was doing a memorial service yesterday. The father of one of the members of our OH hospitality team died recently. As I was getting to know a little bit about him, both his wife and his daughter talked about his taking up the game of golf late in life. In life he had been a farmer and never had the chance to play golf. But when they retired and moved to Florida he took up golf.

And, as the story goes, when he came home from playing golf, he never really talked about the shots or the score...he always talked about the conversations, or the new friends he had made. Now, keep in mind this is a man who actually had two holes in one...but for him, golf was a game of relationships...a way of understanding people more deeply...

That said, I really do believe golf is a nice metaphor for life. Now...consider the title for today's service...*Life in the Fairway*. Those of you who actually attempt the game every now and then know what a challenge it is to get your ball in the fairway...much less keep it there for a whole round. A lot of us spend most of our rounds of golf in the rough...off of the fairway, in the hazards, either the water or the sand traps that we affectionately call "the beach"... Just to reiterate, in golf...being on the beach is a bad thing.

Now, in the game of life, I imagine many of us often we feel like we spend a lot of our lives in the sand traps of life...in the rough—and...Just like golf, it is easy to get in the rough of life pretty quickly. In golf...we can be going along just fine and then wham, a hook, a slice, a whiff...instant trouble.

In life we get that phone call, "It's cancer." we get in an argument with a loved one, or we are uncertain about a situation at work...and wham...there you are...in the rough.

When you get in trouble on the course, there are certain clubs you use to get you back to the fairway, back on course. And for me, I've come to realize in life, there have been special people that have helped me get back in the fairway of life. In golf if you get stuck in a sand trap, you need to get unburied and up and out quickly. Amazingly they've made a club just for that, there is a club called the sand wedge designed just for that purpose. Here is the conundrum though...is it a good thing to be really proficient at using the sand wedge? If you are good at using the sand wedge, that means you are in trouble a lot! I was really good at using the sand wedge. I found in life, that I've really needed a good sand wedge. I have been richly blessed to have several "sand wedges." That is to say, I've been fortunate to have people I can count on when I've gotten in a tight spot, they are people I may not see or talk to all the time, but when I have needed them, they have been there. These are special kind of friends with whom we have a special relationship. At this point, I'd ask you to think about who those folks are for you...and, think about if you are that person for someone.

However, believe it or not, sometimes on the golf course you don't actually land in the rough or a hazard...somehow, miraculously, you land on a soft tuft of grass with no obstacle in your way. Still, though, it takes the right club to move you forward. My favorite club in the bag used to be my five iron. If I could only carry one club to play an entire round, it would be my five iron. I was so comfortable with that club, I rarely hit a bad shot. I could hit it from anywhere and in any situation and had supreme confidence in it. AND, on that rare occasion I happened to land on that soft tuft of grass and the situation called for the five iron, watch out...good things usually occurred.

There is a story about my five iron I've never told before...Several years ago I was playing a round with a friend of mine. We always had a friendly gentlemen's wager on our game—usually the wager was for lunch. We were dead even going into the last hole. We both hit our drives...my friend's landed nicely in the fairway, and mine landed in sand trap. I could hear it already...I think I'll have the filet...no, the lobster. I was in a sand trap about 200 yards from the green. It was almost as if the lady of the lake emerged mystically brandishing a five iron. Oh yeah...the five iron. Well, what happened next was the stuff of legends...

I lined up with the trusty five iron...gave it a good rip, and it flew straight...straight at the pin. When all was said and done...it land this far from the pin...the best part is, is that I don't think I've ever seen someone so genuinely happy to lose a lunch wager.

The reason this experience was so meaningful was because I had a great friend with whom to share it. In life, maybe it's just sharing the mundane stuff, the everyday grind of life—but experiencing it with a trusted friend just makes it better. But again, who is *your* five iron? Who is it that you can count on day-to-day? Who is the person that makes *you* a better person? And, again, who might you be in that role for someone else? It might be a spouse or partner, a workmate, a friend.

For me though, it is important to remember how I got to be so confident in the five iron. Even when I got to the point I could really hit the five iron without even thinking about it, I still practiced with it. Every time I went to the practice range I began and ended the practice round with the five iron—I never took the five iron for granted...I knew I always wanted at least one club in my bag I could hit no matter what.

In life, whoever that five iron is for you should be no different. We don't have deep, committed relationships when we take them for granted. Relationships we come to count on require continual attention and practice...we have to continue nurturing those relationships...the first and last thing we do at the "practice range of life."

Now I could go on and on, club by club in the bag with analogies for what each club does and a corresponding person in life. The one I had to drop was the analogy of the special gadget that gets you out of the water hazard. You know those gizmos with the long articulating arms that stretch to like 10 feet or so, and have the little scoop on the end to save a ball from almost certain disaster? I was going to say that that gadget was like Jesus...you know "Jesus Saves," but I figured that was just a little too kitschy, and I imagine there is a lot of disagreement as to what it means when we say, "Jesus saves." Moreover, in golf when you use the gadget club to save yourself, you still have to pay a one stroke penalty...and that certainly isn't my experience with Jesus...with Jesus there is no penalty to pay.

Anyway, while I really trust the five iron, I began thinking...what is the most important club in the bag? The driver? No not the driver, it can go a long way, but it can get you in the most trouble the fastest. The putter? No, not the putter, you can't even count on it to hit the hole from two feet away. Then it occurred to me that I'd overlooked probably the most obvious thing...the bag itself. The bag carries everything. The bag carries the clubs, the balls, tees...everything. Without the bag we'd be lost trying to even get to the fairway much less stay in it. Could you imagine trying to play golf without a bag?

It became clear to me, that in life, for me, God is the bag. God carries everything big and small. When we come to trust that God can in fact carry the small and the big things it is quite freeing for us. Ultimately, trusting God allows us to work with God in partnership. When we allow God to carry us, we in turn become God's hands and feet. We then can become five irons and sand wedges. Today's Bible passage suggests a way in which God works with and through us to help keep us in the fairway.

In Matthew, Chapter 10, verses 40-42 it says, "*We are intimately linked in this harvest work. Anyone who accepts what you do, accepts me, the One who sent you. Anyone who accepts what I do accepts God, who sent me.*"

*Accepting a messenger of God is as good as being God's messenger. Accepting someone's help is as good as giving someone help.*

*This is a large work I've called you into, but don't be overwhelmed by it. It's best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty, for instance.*

*The smallest act of giving or receiving makes you a true apprentice. You won't lose out on a thing."*

Indeed, this is large work we been called into. Keeping our lives in the fairway is an enormous undertaking that I am convinced is impossible to do alone. In golf we have special clubs that help us in particular situations. In life, we have special people who we have come to count on. Ultimately though, it is trusting God and allowing God to work in and through us that we stay in the fairway, and help others stay in the fairway of life.

CLOSING:

Scottish Golfer Jessica Anderson Valentine said it best, "*The friends you make on the golf course are the friends you make for life.*"