

# “Hold Tight”

August 28, 2005

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## John 16:20-21 *The Message*

Several years ago in former life I used to play golf. Actually, I was a very avid golfer—I played a couple of times a week...but that was before I was married, before children and before seminary. Golf is pretty much a fleeting memory for me these days.

However, there is one memory from my golfing days I'll always cherish. Several years ago I was playing at Stony Creek Golf Course up in Noblesville with a friend of mine. I was having a pretty average round when I walked up to the 16<sup>th</sup> tee, a 160 yard par three. My friend hit first—not his best effort...a little short, and a little to the left. Then it was my turn. I hit my shot...it felt good, it looked good, but I lost it in the sun.

As we walked up the fairway, we came to my friend's ball which was just off the front edge of the green, but my ball was nowhere to be seen. I figured I had hit it over the green, so I was poking around in the woods when my friend screamed at me...Stan, Stan, its in the hole, you hit a hole in one. I calmly walked over to the hole, and sure enough, I had hit a hole-in-one. My friend was literally jumping up and down, waving his arms, shouting at the group behind us...”he hit a hole-in-one, he hit a hole-in-one.” I casually bent down and picked up the ball and walked on to the next tee.

Now I know I'm running the risk of sounding like I'm trying to toot my own horn here, but quite the opposite is the case. Listen to the rest of the story...My friend was slapping me on the back and going on and on when he noticed I was being conspicuously nonchalant. Finally he said, Stan...you hit a hole-in-one...aren't you even excited? I just kind of shrugged.

My friend was amazed, he said, “If I hit a hole-in-one, everybody on the course would know; heck, everybody in the county would know...what's wrong with you?” Again, I just kind of shrugged not really knowing how to explain.

The explanation is my father. Rather, I am my father's son...a chip of the old block. I learned early on, and have had a lifetime of practice, to never show too much emotion... never get too happy, never get too sad. Never celebrate too much, never grieve too much. In short, my dad taught me to be pretty stoic.

This is *one way* to manage the highs and lows that life throws at us. But...when we try to manage our lives this way...try to avoid the highs and lows, I believe we miss out on some of the richest and fullest experiences of life. I think many of us try to avoid these highs and lows because we believe that somehow we can spare ourselves the pain that often comes in the wake of the highs and lows. This is a very safe way to live, but many times a very lonely way.

The movie *Shadowlands* is the true life story of C. S. Lewis. C. S. Lewis was a professor of English at Oxford College in England for over 30 years. He is perhaps best known for his writing on Christianity. Like many of us, Lewis' adult life was shaped by events that happened to him when he was a child. When Lewis was 12 years old, he lost his mother to cancer. Not much more than a month after she died, Lewis was shipped away from his home in Ireland to a boarding school in London. A loving mother was replaced by a strict, unsympathetic headmaster.

Ironically though, Lewis devoted the rest of his life to learning and scholarship. He eventually became an excellent student making his life's work the mastery of languages, literature and history. The movie picks up in the latter period of Lewis' life where he is teaching at Oxford.

At Oxford Lewis had created a safe and tidy environment for himself. Through his research, writing and colleagues, Lewis has insulated himself from the emotional highs and lows of life. And, at Oxford, one of the most prestigious academic institutions in England, this would be easy to do...*you see, at Oxford we don't exhibit any emotion... emotion is a very American thing you know...*

Well, Lewis' life is turned upside down when he met a very vibrant and *emotional* American. Not wanting to relive the pain when he lost his mother to cancer, Lewis had been a life-long bachelor, replacing personal relationships with Oxford. However, when the American poet Joy Gresham came into his life, the walls of emotional safety he had built for himself at Oxford began to crumble.

Lewis and Gresham became very good friends at first. However, in 1956 a crisis occurred when the British government refused to renew her visa, which meant that she'd have to return to the United States. Rather than have that happen, Gresham and Lewis decided to marry so that Gresham could stay in Britain legally. It would be a marriage in name only though, and they would remain good friends as before.

This way Lewis still didn't have to commit emotionally—things were still safe...Lewis was still in control. Lewis hit a hole-in-one and just casually walked off to the next tee. But, as is often the case in life, we find out we are not in control after all. No matter how hard we try to avoid the highs and lows of life—they happen anyway.

In another ironic twist in Lewis' life, just months after their civil marriage, Joy Gresham was diagnosed with cancer. As the disease had spread throughout her body, the doctors held out little hope for her survival. It was at this point...the point that Lewis realized Joy wouldn't be with him for much longer that Lewis realized just how much he loved her. Soon after, the two were married again, this time by an Anglican priest, in a bedside ceremony at the hospital.

At almost 60 years of age, C. S. Lewis began to learn the most important lesson of his life. A lesson not found in any textbook, library or university. Lewis was learning that experiencing the highs and lows of life instead of managing them was bringing him unparalleled happiness.

For all of his adult life C. S. Lewis had managed his life so that he was in complete control of his emotional environment. Early in their friendship Joy said to Lewis about that environment he had created at Oxford, “*You’ve arranged a life for yourself where no one can touch you.*”

How many of us is this true for in our lives? We arrange our lives so no one or no thing can touch us. We choose the merry-go-round of life instead of the rollercoaster because it seems the safer choice...

**VIDEO: Parenthood—Grandma talks about the rollercoaster.**

What Lewis discovered is what Grandma knew...life may be safer on the merry-go-round, but it certainly is richer, fuller, more meaningful on the rollercoaster. In the darkest hour of her sickness, Lewis said to Joy, “*I started living when I started loving you.*”

Lewis had uncovered one of life’s great paradoxes...that sometimes in order to experience true joy and happiness we have to experience pain. No relationship of any substance comes without pain—it is unavoidable. Joy said to Lewis, “*We can’t have the happiness of yesterday without the pain of today. That’s the deal.*”

And that *is* the deal. As Lewis himself said, “*Pain is God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world.*” I want to be clear here though...I don’t believe God purposely causes pain so that our sense of joy and happiness will somehow be more heightened and pronounced. No, not at all...What this is saying is that for Lewis, he had been sleepwalking through life. He had *managed* life instead of *experiencing* it. It wasn’t until the megaphone of cancer roused him to attention that he began to experience the spirit of a life fulfilled.

A few weeks ago Nancy Lafferty shared a story with a few of us about some friends of hers who had been trying to adopt a baby. Nancy said that the couple had been in the adoption process for 8 long years and had suffered numerous setbacks along the way. It’s tough to imagine the pain of believing you have adopted a child, but for whatever reason at the last minute it doesn’t happen. However, this couple was determined. Finally, a couple of weeks ago, they were able to bring home their baby boy. They actually got to be in the delivery room with the birthmother. All the frustration...all the heartache...all the low ebbs of life were erased with the cries of a newborn baby.

Jesus had been talking with the Disciples about his impending death...that he would no longer be with the Disciples. But as was often the case, he didn’t come right out and say it directly, he told it in the form of a story...a story I think resonates with us this morning.

*Jesus knew they were dying to ask him what he meant, so he said, "Are you trying to figure out among yourselves what I meant when I said, "In a day or so you're not going to see me, but then in another day or so you will see me"? Then fix this firmly in your minds: You're going to be in deep mourning while the godless world throws a party. You'll be sad, very sad, but your sadness will develop into gladness.*

*"When a woman gives birth, she has a hard time, there's no getting around it. But when the baby is born, there is joy in the birth. This new life in the world wipes out memory of the pain.*

Life *is* full of ups and downs...there is no getting around it. So many of us try to avoid these ups and downs; we try to insulate ourselves from hurt and pain, and deny ourselves the joy of celebration. But by doing this we miss the beautiful experiences of life's rich pageant.

What Jesus knew...what C. S. Lewis and Nancy's friends learned is that even from the lowest low, from the darkest hour, there is always new life— *This new life in the world wipes out memory of the pain.* That's the deal

### **CLOSING:**

If you've every watched the cartoon South Park, you know sometimes they can be, well, a little offensive. However, often there are little gems as well. In one particular episode, one of the characters who happens to be named Stan (no relation)...has had his girlfriend break up with him and his friends are trying to cheer him up to no avail. Finally Stan says,

*I love life...Yeah, I'm sad, but at the same time, I'm really happy that something could make me feel that sad. It's like...It makes me feel alive, you know. It makes me feel human. The only way I could feel this sad now is if I felt something really good before. So I have to take the bad with the good. So I guess what I'm feeling is like a beautiful sadness.*

Have a great Sunday, go in peace. AMEN