

The Gospel According to Golf

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Isaiah 5:1-7; 11:1-5

Something fairly remarkable happened in a golf tournament several years ago. It was a professional golf tournament up in the Orlando area – the Bay Hill Invitational. Several golfers were contending for the lead including a seasoned pro named Jeff Sluman. On the 17 hole in the second round of the tournament Sluman hit his ball into the water. This is a shot I have come to perfect in my game – hitting the ball in the water. Several ponds and lakes in Sarasota have my golf balls sunk into their muddy floors. But it's a rare occurrence for a pro, but nevertheless Sluman hit his ball into the pond. The tournament had designated on this hole a drop area for those who had been unfortunate enough to hit their ball into the water. The drop area is an area designated by the officials to place a new ball to continue the hole. Sluman did just that and actually holed his next shot from the drop zone and escaped the hole with a par. That left him two behind the leaders.

But then came the evening. And it was in the evening between the second and third rounds that Mr. Sluman played in his mind over and over again the possibility that the area where he had been instructed to place his ball was, in fact, incorrect and may have been slightly closer to the hole than where he should have been. And in golf when a player intentionally, or unintentionally, places himself or herself at any advantage over another player these are grounds for disqualification.

The next morning after a sleepless night Mr. Sluman approached the tournament officials and reviewed the previous day's scenario to ask their ruling. But while officials remained unconvinced that Sluman had done the wrong thing the golfer already knew in his mind that there was a shadow of doubt. And a shadow

was enough. He disqualified himself before the rules people could make their judgment. "I wasn't sure," said Sluman, "and if I'm not sure, I couldn't live with myself and keep playing. What if I won? It would be like a curse."

So he called it on himself.

Bobby Jones, the great golf icon of a century ago, in a qualifying tournament for the U.S. Open, hit his ball into the woods. Long before there were TV cameras that followed golfers into the woods, Jones went in himself and found his ball. In preparing to swing, the ball moved. Jones emerged out of the woods and called a penalty on himself. A one stroke penalty that could have determined the outcome. When later he was complemented for his honesty and sportsmanship, Jones replied, "You might as well have praised a man for not robbing a bank."

He called it on himself.

Golf is one of those unique sports that assumes upon those who participate that if they are going to play they are going to call it on themselves. No player is to be given an unfair advantage. That once a player steps on the course all get to play by the same rules. And all abide by the same rules. You are responsible to call your own foul. No referees to call the penalty. No umpire to call balls and strikes, safes and outs. Everyone polices themselves. It's the honor system and the honor is all about the integrity of the game. Golf is not about what you can get away with, golf is about how you maintain the standard of the game while seeking to excel at what you do. Golf is about conscience. Golf is about calling it on yourself.

High school basketball coach, Cleveland Stroud, and his team from Rockdale County, Georgia won the state basketball championship back in 1987. The thrill of a lifetime for any player, any coach. About a month after being handed the trophy Stroud discovered that a player on the team who had played just 45 seconds the entire season had been academically ineligible to play. Stroud returned the state trophy and forfeited the title. "I called my players together," he

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said, “and told them that in a few years people would forget the score, and even who won, but they wouldn't forget what you're made of.” Stroud's actions earned him the 1987 International Fair Play trophy.

He called it on himself.

Now the thing about calling it on yourself is that when the rules expect you to call it on yourself – then all you have left to appeal to is your conscience. No referees, no umpires, just your conscience. And your conscience is that part of yourself that lies deep inside your core. Conscience is the place where you go to be honest. Conscience is the place when you go to be honest with yourself so you can be honest with everybody else. Conscience is when you are lying awake at night and everybody else is asleep and it's just you with your thoughts. It's just you with the wondering about who you really are, what you have really done, and what you might decide to do. At three o'clock in the morning it's just you and your conscience. It's just you to call it on yourself.

Conscience is what Bobby Jones took with him into the woods that day only to see the ball move. Just a little. Or what Cleveland Stroud accessed inside himself when he wondered if 45 seconds really mattered.

And I suppose conscience is where we go to find within ourselves the image of God. The Bible tells us that human beings were created in the image of God – the imago dei. No other creature bears the image of God.

And no other creature, as far as we can tell, bears a conscience. In all of creation there is no conscience but in that one species – the human being. Conscience is where we discover the imago dei, the image of God. And in discovering the imago dei, the image of God, what we discover is that it is in our conscience that we find our freedom. In the deep recesses of our conscience we find the image of God and we find our freedom.

Because, you see, we are most free when we exercise our conscience. When we act upon

what we believe to be the truth. What we believe to be right. Jeff Sluman was most free when he exercised his conscience and disqualified himself. Bobby Jones was most free when he exercised his conscience and call a penalty on himself. Cleveland Stroud was most free when he exercised his conscience and handed back the trophy. Conscience is where God gives us our freedom and where God gives us the dignity to make our own choices. To do what we think is right and to do what we think is fair. We are most in the image of God when we exercise our conscience.

And it is all of this that may help us to understand the prophetic message of Isaiah when he conveys the Word of the Lord to the people of Israel. And the word of the Lord to Israel is that God pictures Israel as this wonderful vineyard that he has planted in the world. God imagines Israel as this vineyard for the world. A vineyard of great expectation. A vineyard from which God anticipates great fruit. And God creates the vineyard in freedom and gives offers it to his people in freedom and says you can freely do with it as you please. It is yours to do with as you please.

But the fruit that God is looking for to come from this vineyard is justice. "I expected from my garden justice," he says. In other words, "I expected from your life together a level playing field. I expected from you that none of you would unfairly put yourself ahead. I expected from you that everybody would get a fair

shake. I expected you to descend into your conscience and exercise your freedom. I expected from you to live into your imago dei and discern what is right and then live into it.”

Justice is a gift given to us by God, that we might freely give it to others. We are most human, we are most in the image of God, we are most free – when we seek justice. When we seek justice for all those who are on the playing field.

But that isn’t easy it? Justice can be a hard thing to figure out in a world as confusing as ours. Justice can be a hard thing to sort out in souls that are as confusing as ours.

Makes me think of that sermon I heard a long time ago from an old veteran of the civil rights movement who retold the old story about what happens when you are trying to be just. And what happens when you are trying to be just is that inside you there are these two dogs – a good dog and a bad dog. And inside every person these two dogs, the good dog and the bad dog, get to fighting. And they fight and they fight and they fight. And the dog that wins is the dog the person most feeds.

Justice is hard thing to figure out in a confusing world and a confusing soul. But conscience is that place where we go to have that conversation with God and it is where we hear from God the question – which dog are you trying to feed? Conscience is where we go to have that question asked of us. To be reminded that the fruit God is looking for is fairness. The fruit of the fair shake.

I’m guessing that’s a little bit of what Jesus was trying to say when he said, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. When I was hungry you fed me, naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me.” Or when the early church began to gather after Pentecost Luke tells us that they held all things in common and there was not a needy person among them. Or when Isaiah imagines the Messiah he says in chapter 11, “With righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the

mEEK of the earth.” Or when the apostle Paul says, “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

Feed the good dog.

And it is with all these things that God leaves it up to us. Leaves the garden up to us. Like the man who was walking down the street and he noticed a man working in his garden. And the man said rather piously, “That is a beautiful garden you and God have created!” To which the gardener responded, “Thanks, but you should have seen it when God had it to himself.”

And of course that is the wonderful thing about being human. God invites us into the garden and dignifies our human souls and says that the vineyard is only as good as we put our own souls into it. Our own consciences. Our own freedom. Justice doesn’t just happen. It takes hands like ours to get a little dirty. And we free our hands when we search our souls. When we plum our consciences and ask ourselves the hard questions – what can I do? How can I make the world a fairer place? What chances can I take to help the poor and bring good news to the broken-hearted? Is there anything to call on myself? Any twinge of conscience I must address? Any goodness I can plant in the garden?

And so perhaps we’ve all wondered about these things in the wake of the most recent terrorism in the world. Beirut, Baghdad, Paris, Mali with more most certainly to come. These awful, brutal injustices. Innocent people taken and injured. And the garden looks a mess. And we weep and we pray and we lament and we wonder what in heaven’s name is the world coming to?

And of course the good Lord asks us in these words of Isaiah the same question, “What in heaven’s name is the world coming to?” And maybe a second question, “And what in heaven’s name are you going to do about it?” We have our elected representatives, of course, to determine foreign policy and appropriate nation state response – and we can debate those things till we are blue in the face. And we usually do.

But in the end what vineyard are we to plant? What seeds are we to scatter? What shoots are we called to water? What fouls are we to call even upon ourselves? What freedom are we called to exercise?

For I imagine when those cars and trucks of food pull into our parking lot and are unloaded into our storage closet. And when those volunteers show up and pack those grocery bags early in the morning. And those other volunteers come to open the pantry doors and prepare to receive our guests. And when those bags are placed into hands of need with a smile and a blessing. And when those homeless families are given a little shelter for the week in our Sunday School rooms. And when those children are given medical exams and back packs and clothes and shoes to go back to school. When it dawns upon our consciences to do these things is this not when we find the image of God, the freedom to be the imago dei? Terrorism comes they say from terrorist “cells”. Where does goodness come from? Goodness cells? Goodness gardens?

We are most ourselves when we act upon our consciences. When the good dog is fed. We are most free when we are most just. And the garden is most beautiful when our hands are most dirty.

Wasn’t it Edmund Burke, the great British statesman, who said, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing.”



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Church of the Palms

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