

“O God, you are our God, we seek you,  
and our souls thirst for you.” AMEN!

I used to play golf.

You can say a lot of things about the game,  
but I just wanted to mention the way  
that golf is sport that can tell you  
a lot about a person.

There's the aspect of self-scoring.

The way you count your strokes will tell you  
something about how trustworthy a person is.

There's also an honor system built into the game.

Take for instance an errant shot into the woods or  
what golfers call “the rough.”

Your all alone and the ball might sit on a tree root  
or lay deep in the grass.

It can be tempting to move the ball around  
so you get a better lie making it easier to  
get a clean hit on the ball.

But, guess what, if you move your ball to do

that and do not count the penalty strokes,  
you're breaking the rules.

And that can tell you a lot about a person.

There's those things and also something  
called golf etiquette.

One of the things golfers are supposed to do is  
to let faster players play through.

If you are a slow player and don't let others  
who play quicker pass by you,  
that tells of something about you.

When you strike a golf ball with your club,  
sometimes a divot is caused.

That's a strip of grass that's peeled off the ground.

Good golfers cause divots and good golfers  
replace their divots so the grass can grow  
back quicker.

Golf can tell you a lot about a person's honor,  
trustworthiness, and environmental care.  
(Pause)

An aspect of golf that relates to the texts today

is the games insistence to keep going.

Even successful golfers often have a poor shot,  
make an error with a slice or hook, and/or  
miss an easy putt.

Then, on the next hole, they have  
to put that behind them and  
focus on the next swing. (Pause)

If there's ever a good biblical model for  
the philosophy of focusing on the next shot,  
even in the midst of mistakes,  
it is found when looking at the disciples.

Especially Peter, who like so many of us,  
had big ideas and often spoke too quickly, or  
did things he later regretted.

When it came to understanding what  
Jesus was doing by going to the cross to die  
and then be raised, he said,

“No way, Lord!”

When it came to owning up that he,  
not only “knew” who Jesus was,  
but was one of his followers,

Peter said, “No, I don’t know the man!”

Peter had one bad shot after another. (Pause)

But, he never gave up.

He encountered despair, and he kept swinging,  
you could say.

And since he did, he was there to encounter  
the risen Christ and then went on,  
even amidst more mistakes,  
he went on to do great things. (Pause)

This is precisely the point of Jesus’ parable, I think.

Notice that the tree in the parable  
is not producing fruit.

The owner has checked on it numerous times  
and still nothing.

No fruit.

“The tree’s no good,” the owner said, “cut it down.”

Yet, the gardener is not ready to give up on it.

The gardener doesn’t want to focus on

what the tree hasn't done, instead  
the gardener seems to know  
what the tree is capable of doing.

Don't dwell on the past, the gardener implies,  
think of what must be done next. (Pause)

A group of pastors gathered for informal study  
late one evening over a beer and the question  
was presented,

"If Jesus walked into your congregation back home,  
would the people there recognize him?"

You can imagine the varieties of answers  
each pastor responded with  
because you are fully aware of  
the varieties of people that sit  
in the pews at church.

The discussion was long and heavy, but  
then the issue was turned upside down  
when one of the pastors said,

"The good news of the gospel is not that I,  
or any person in the congregation,  
is able to recognize Jesus if he walked  
into the church.

The good news is that Jesus  
would recognize us.” (Pause)

See, those pastors had forgotten that  
the wonder of God’s grace is not  
what we can do, but what God is doing.

We will always be fruitless if we are  
not able to self-reflect on the ways  
the gardener is working on us.

Individually, and corporately,  
personally and congregationally,  
we must be aware of ways  
we are producing fruit, or not. (Pause)

Maybe that’s the question we ask first.

And if you, I, or the congregation is  
not producing fruit, why not?

Maybe there’s been a tragedy in life  
that caused disruption.

Perhaps there’s fear that’s taken ahold and  
disrupted the fruit production.

Maybe, it’s like the golfer who wants to have  
the better score at the end, and honor

and trustworthiness and care  
have been forsaken.

Whatever the reason, that we're not producing fruit,  
the gardener knows what to do.

And we are here, so that's a good sign of  
the necessary self-reflection. (Pause)

Once upon a time, there was a nurse who  
gave themselves unselfishly and devoted  
themselves to their patients.

Day in day out, committed care.

A patient noticed and was deeply moved  
by the nurse's attention to details and to care  
and wanted to thank the nurse graciously.

The nurse replied, "Oh, I'm not doing it for you;  
I'm doing this for Jesus."

How does that reply make you feel?

It sounds religious,  
sounds to be focused on Jesus, and  
even sounds humble - it's all of that -  
and it's just awful!

Self-reflection, participation with  
a community of believers in a healthy  
body of people makes us present  
for one another with compassion  
and respect.

These are what we do to orient ourselves  
toward people of all kinds.

From the way we welcome new members  
to the ways we run the congregation, day to day,  
week to week, and so on.

Compassion and respect are our  
foundation from leading our stewardship  
program to the ways we welcome children,

from our partnerships with other organizations  
that align with our beliefs to those who  
use our building, from committee to council.

St. Stephen should be a place where good news  
is not only “on going,”

but as it has been said,  
“where good news is also going on.”

Taking it's next swing. Not giving up.



Replacing our divots and asking for forgiveness for  
past errors and letting ministries  
that are growing play through. (Pause)

I hope you all see, that not only is it important  
to belong but it is important to participate.

Be a witness and know you are planted for a purpose.

We are planted for a purpose and  
the gardener is at work in us.

And with Jesus, with Jesus, think of what  
we are capable of doing.

AMEN!