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Second Season of Joy

Luke 15:11-23; Luke 6: 37-39

The signs of summer are all around us these days. Hot, humid days, trips to the pool or lake and giving the backyard grill a workout. At our house the true sign of summer is the golf club. Actually the clubs are out year round, but summer days are considered specially made for golf.

Now I must confess, I myself am not a golfer, though I do have an appreciation for the game. My husband, Randy, is the one who loves to play golf. I am a long-time sports fan and I will confess that I actually enjoy watching golf. I assure you that I realize watching paint dry is more exhilarating, yet on a Sunday afternoon if I have absolutely nothing else to do, I occasionally watch a televised golf tournament and enjoy it. It is the only sport that I can think of that the announcers whisper and all golfers are certainly acquainted with the famous "Quiet Please" signs. Being a fan of golf requires very different skills and behavior than say, being a fan of the Rowdy Raider's Football team or the infamous Cheesehead fanatics of the Green Bay Packers.

Golf is not only a sign of summer, but according to those who play, golf can be a deeply spiritual experience. So, today, we offer our praise to our God and learn from not only the words of wisdom of Scripture but also from the spiritual experience called golf.

There is a wonderful children's book entitled, *Alexander's Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. You have to love that title. We have all had a bad, bad day. We have all made mistakes that we prefer to keep to ourselves, or better yet erase it from all memory. We have all made decisions that bring us a sense of embarrassment and/or regret. I am sure most of us can point to a no good, very bad day. Even just remembering fills us with negative feelings. Yet, in the wisdom of the Buddha, "we are shaped by our thoughts, we become what we think."

In a land that is growing ever more polarized, in a country where blaming has become a national past-time, we are becoming increasingly negative in our thoughts and our language. Our thoughts are consumed with negativity about a variety of social issues, about the other people who share this planet and it would seem even about one's self. It is estimated that 8 million Americans have an eating disorder. Suicide is the 11th leading cause of death in this nation and it is suggested that by the year 2020 depression will be the highest ranking disease in developed countries. We may be developed, we may be sophisticated, but we are not happy. We may be churched, but we are not living out our faith. We may be free, but we are not liberated from negative thinking. Loving our neighbors as ourselves is becoming increasingly dangerous as self love appears to be a dwindling reality.

I am of the opinion that no one knows more about the power of the mind to affect behavior than a golfer. Many clergy, many spiritual leaders play golf because of its spiritual nature.

Years ago, as I was going through the ordination process in California, a member of the Board of Ordained Ministry in my district took me aside and said, "Anne, you do play golf don't you?" I could tell that my answer might actually affect my future in the church. I was a little nervous when I said, "Well, in that I am eight months pregnant, I am not playing golf right now." He said, "Right, right, but you do play..." at which point I just smiled and said, "golf is such a great game." Fortunately he sighed and was satisfied. That happened more than twenty years ago, and I am sure that he was struggling to think that a woman was going to serve in his district. For me to be both female and a non-golfer was just too much for him to bear. He loved his golf as much as he loved ministry - not uncommon in California. I still do not play golf much to the chagrin of some of my clergy friends who play every Wednesday guilt free because it is such a spiritual experience.

I am not convinced that clergy play golf expecting to master the perfect swing or the perfect game, but rather to understand first hand how the mind can indeed impact the body and spirit. And then there is always the hope of something spectacular. According to spiritual guru, Deepak Chopra, "...once in a blue moon, I can hit a shot like Tiger Woods." It is that radical hope that keeps players engaged. Spiritual types are supposed to be ever hopeful! Hitting a ball like Tiger Woods once or twice in a lifetime would keep anybody engaged.

I have been reading how-to books on golf this week. Not the kind of book that speaks to the perfection of the swing or the choice of club, but rather books that speak to engaging one's spirit in life based upon the game of golf. Scott Peck wrote a book entitled, *Golf and the Spirit*. Peck comes to the conclusion that golf is a metaphor for life and he writes and I quote, "golf, next to marriage and parenthood, can routinely be the greatest of life's learning opportunities." Deepak Chopra, founder of the Chopra Center for Well Being, writes in his book, *Golf for Enlightenment* offers seven strategies that apply to golf and life. Finally, I read, *Whose your Caddy?* Written by sports writer Rick Reilly, the book is an account of Reilly's ineptitude as a caddy for some very famous golfers including David Duval, John Daly, and Jack Nicklaus. He also caddies for Donald Trump and Deepak Chopra. The book is hysterical. I loved the chapter where the great guru Deepak Chopra uses some bad language to express his frustration. This deep spiritual leader is just like everyone else out on the links. This wonderful exchange between Chopra and his golf pro Wendy is included in the book.

"On No. 8 tee box he (Deepak) said, I must not slice it here, Wendy. I dream about slicing here. It torments me.

Wendy: Deepak, what have we said about negative thought before we swing?

Deepak: Not to let them creep into my head before I swing.

Wendy: Exactly.

(Rick Reilly): Man's written 20 books about the human mind and a lady golf pro is telling him what to think. He went on to make a mess of that hole too."

We are what we think. Our thoughts influence our actions. Negative thinking will indeed spoil even our best intentions. Negative thoughts will begin to haunt us, derail our success and even pollute our relationships.

What I love about golf, and I do not mean tournament golf, but the kind of golf that two friends enjoy on an early Saturday morning, what I love about that game of golf is the mulligan. There are several stories about how the mulligan came into the game of golf, but somewhere around in the 1940s the mulligan became an accepted practice. "The term mulligan in golf is a second shot allowed by an opponent and not counted on the score, when the first shot was hideously muffed or missed altogether." (www.straightdope.com)

A mulligan allows a player a second shot without penalty or record. Ah, I love that - two golfers agreeing to a "do over" without any negative repercussions. One just releases the negative of the past and steps unblemished into the present. The mulligan seems like an excellent formula to deal with any horrible, terrible, no good, very bad day.

The reality of the mulligan is the theology of grace. Of course the player knows that he/she made a horrendous shot. That is the truth that predicates the need for a mulligan. Recognition is implicit. The golfer steps up to the ball with no intention of making the same mistake again. It is the same with grace. Our lives are a complex set of twists and turns, successes and failures, dreams and disappointments. Grace holds us not to the negatives of the past, but to the blessing and potential of the moment. Grace is God's free gift to us--an unending reality of "do-overs" without penalty. Of course the Christian church has often been more comfortable with judgment than grace. It offers the concept of grace with the necessary lip service, but falls far short of living up to the full potential of grace. Even Christians, good people like you and me, tend to repeat the negative stories of ourselves and others over and over and over again until they are embedded into our memory and even our soul.

Negativity becomes not only the main theme in our words, but over time, our thoughts can become overwhelmed and we create a negative atmosphere starving us of hope and joy.

The theology of the mulligan is that if we take a shot so pathetic that it cannot be played or a shot that will significantly damage our overall game, we are redeemed by the grace of the do-over, the mulligan. The question is, can we move on and accept the grace or will we be consumed by the mistake? It is the question that faces every golfer. It is the question that confronts every Christian.

According to author, Wayne Dyer, "Once you understand fully that what you think about is what expands, you start to get very careful about what you think about. When you put your thought energy on your intentions with passion you ultimately will act upon these thoughts and you are bound to attract what you are thinking about into your life."

Translated into golf terms, if you focus on the fear of hitting the water hazard, you will hit that little white ball right into the water. In life, you spend your days criticizing and belittling yourself and others, you will find yourself small and hardened and cynical. When we redirect our thinking to that which is beneficial, hopeful and positive, we will find that our world view enlarges.

Dyer states it this way, "One of the biggest benefits of no longer giving energy to the things you don't believe in is the discovery that the universe is unlimited abundance." In golf, if you focus on the green, the water hazard seems to get smaller. In life, if you focus on solutions instead of complaints, challenges seem less overwhelming.

We direct our thinking. We can choose to do more than merely react to the words or actions of another. We can take charge of our thinking and determine the environment we create for our thoughts and our lives. In the process we can open ourselves to the grace of the moment and release ourselves from the negativity of the past.

The father of that wayward son of Scripture had every right to greet his son with an emphatic, "I told you so" and begin the long parental lecture #101 on being responsible for one's actions, the perils of careless living, the futility of a life and resources wasted. You know the lecture. You could give it with far less provocation, I know that I have. But that father did not dive into his righteous anger. He did not dwell on what he could not fix. He did not demean his son. He did not focus on the hazard and miss the opportunity. He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and welcomed him home. That father chose his response. He used a mulligan. He stepped away from the past and embraced grace in the present. "This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

The theology of the mulligan is the theology of Grace. Grace is not rooted in brokenness, but offers the path toward wholeness.

Today I share with you a story found in a book written by a professor that I had in seminary. Lewis B. Smedes opens one of his books, *Forgive and Forget* with this fable entitled, "The Magic Eyes". Though I have condensed the fable, I am staying true to its intent.

In a village in innermost Friesland there lived a long, thin baker, a righteous man, with a long thin chin and a long thin nose. He was so upright that he seemed to spray righteousness from his thin lips over everyone who came near him; so the people preferred to stay away.

His wife, Hilda, was short and round. Hilda did not keep people at bay with righteousness; her softness seemed to invite them instead to come close to her in order to share the warm cheer of her open heart.

Hilda respected her righteous husband, and loved him too, as much as he allowed her; but her heart ached for something more from him than his worthy righteousness. Hilda betrayed her wedding vows and her husband.

Hilda's adultery soon became the talk of the tavern and the scandal of the congregation. Everyone assumed that the baker would cast Hilda out of his house, so righteous was he. But he surprised everyone by keeping Hilda as his wife, saying he forgave her as the Good Book said he should.

In his heart of hearts, however, he could not forgive Hilda for bringing shame to his name. Whenever he thought about her, his feelings toward her were angry and hard; he despised her. When it came right down to it, he hated her for betraying him after he had been so good and so faithful a husband to her.

He only pretended to forgive Hilda so that he could punish her with his righteous mercy. But his fakery did not sit well in heaven.

So each time that the baker would feel his secret hate toward Hilda, an angel came to him and dropped a small pebble into his heart. Each time a pebble dropped, he would feel a stab of pain.

Thus he hated her the more; his hate brought him pain and his pain made him hate.

The pebbles multiplied. And his heart grew very heavy with the weight of them, so heavy that the top half of his body bent forward so far that he had to strain his neck upward in order to see straight ahead. Weary and hurt, he began to wish he were dead.

The angel who dropped the pebbles into his heart came to him one night and told him how he could be healed of his hurt.

There was one remedy, only one, for the hurt of a wounded heart. The baker would need the miracle of magic eyes. He would need eyes that could look back to the beginning of his hurt and see his Hilda, not as a wife who betrayed him, but as a weak woman who needed him. Only a new way of looking at things through the magic eyes could heal the hurt flowing from the wounds of yesterday.

"Nothing can change the past," the baker said. "Hilda is guilty, a fact that not even an angel can change."

"Yes, poor hurting man, you are right," the angel said. "You cannot change the past. You can only heal the hurt that comes to you from the past. And you can heal it only with the vision of the magic eyes."

"And how can I get your magic eyes?" pouted the baker.

"Only ask, desiring as you ask, and they will be given you. And each time you see Hilda through your new eyes, one pebble will be lifted from your aching heart."

The baker could not ask at once, for he had grown to love his hatred. But the pain of his heart finally drove him to want and to ask for the magic eyes that the angel had promised. So he asked. And the Angel gave.

Soon Hilda began to change in front of his eyes, wonderfully and mysteriously. He began to see her as a needy woman who loved him instead of a wicked woman who betrayed him.

The angel kept his promise; he lifted the pebbles from the baker's heart, one by one, though it took a long time to take them all away. Gradually he felt his heart grow lighter; he began to walk straight again, and somehow his nose and his chin seemed less thin and sharp than before. He invited Hilda to come into his heart again, and she came, and together they began again a journey into their second season of humble joy.

Grace is literally the transformation of heart and spirit offered to each of us powered by God's love. Do I believe that having a positive outlook will bring us world peace this week? No. But I do believe that we have control over our corner of the world and bringing a positive attitude will build up not only our own spirit, but also that attitude will encourage health in the spirit of others. Ultimately it comes down to whether our faith is more lip service than practice, more fantasy than belief. Releasing negative energy generated from the past allows us to make a fresh start, to begin anew and maybe even embrace joy.

Jesus spoke to an audience that was living through occupation. They knew all about brutality and injustice. They understood oppression. To these people, Jesus said, "judge not, condemn not; forgive." He understood that the result of such a choice was a fresh start in God's grace.

Rejoice--this is not a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. This is a day of grace. May this be a day when we choose not to focus on the hazards, bunkers and fears of our lives. May we choose to get back on course in our lives and relationships, accept a mulligan if needed and start fresh. Resist replaying negative thoughts over and over again, and reach for hope and grace as you embrace a second season of joy!

I read a story this week about a woman who was in Louisiana after hurricane Katrina assisting a friend with the arduous process of cleaning. The woman said that she could not just leave the broken china, figurines and collectibles and asked if she could collect them and promised to return them later. Her friend, the owner of the home was happy for the shards of broken glass and china to be removed. That is when the Ministry of Shards was born for the greater New Orleans area. Since then the broken bits have been used to craft crosses and mirrors for volunteers who come to the area to help. The crosses are made out of the broken china and "what-nots" that have been retrieved from the homes that were gutted. (www.weekofcompassion.org) The woman who collected the first shards now leads a ministry with bits and pieces of the devastation of the area and offers these words: "The symbolism of pieces being made into something new is a perfect metaphor for both the strength and power of a loving community and the transformation that occurs when we are allowed to be broken and then reformed through faith."

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