

Take a Mulligan, But Go for the Green!

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Matthew 25:14-30*

The Pope met with the College of Cardinals to discuss a proposal from Shimon Peres, the former leader of Israel.

"Your holiness," said one of the Cardinals, "Mr. Peres wants to determine whether Jews or Christians are more athletic, by challenging you to a golf match."

The Pope was greatly disturbed, as he had never held a golf club in his life.

"Not to worry," said the Cardinal, "We'll call America and talk to Jack Nicklaus. We'll make him a Cardinal, he can play Shimon Peres ... We can't lose!" Everyone agreed it was a good idea. The call was made and, of course, Jack was honored and agreed to play.

The day after the match, Nicklaus reported to the Vatican to inform the Pope of his success in the match. "I came in second, your Holiness," said Nicklaus.

"Second?!" exclaimed the surprised Pope. "You came in second to Shimon Peres?!"

"No," said Nicklaus, "second to Rabbi Woods."

And speaking of Tiger Woods, I'm sure you all know about his latest victory (let me say, if I know about it, surely you must. Understanding that I don't really follow sports). Tiger Woods is probably the greatest golfer the world has ever seen. At the age of 32 he has already won 13 major tournaments and is on his way toward surpassing Jack Nicklaus's record of 18 majors. And just this past week, Tiger Woods, in a playoff for the 108th U.S. Open, going into a "sudden death playoff", with Rocco Mediate, won in a 19th hole struggle. Tiger called it, "Probably the greatest tournament I've ever had." And he did this with an injured knee. He was in great pain – but he persevered, going for the green!

Tiger Woods is a man of immense talent. He has honed that God given talent into, arguably the best golfer in the world! Mediocrity appears not to be in his vocabulary. Striving for the best, doing one's best, focusing on the goal, the green, is Tiger's way of life! He will take a hiatus, to heal, but he will be back! And the world will impatiently wait.

Now, I'll grant there are few Tigers roaming around, but we never know when they will appear. And there are many talents, of varying degrees, just waiting to be actualized. And yes, all of us will stumble in our pursuits, I'm sure even Tiger on occasion, has tripped up in the pursuit of fulfilling his talent. I venture to believe (outside professional golfing) he himself has taken a few mulligans in his life.

On the golf course, and certainly in life, once in a while we take a mulligan, and go on!! We don't stop. We don't give up! We work to improve, to do better, to excel, to go for the green!

For you uninitiated, a mulligan is a golf term. A mulligan is a shot retaken, due to an errant shot. They are not allowed in professional play, but often are allowed among friendly social play. Usually only taken on the first tee.

I'm reminded of the American playing in Scotland with a Scot. The American took his mulligan and then asked the Scot. "What do you call a mulligan?" The Scot answered, "We call it a three."

Friends, this morning I want to encourage you to find and use your God given talents.

- Go for the green!

Yes. Yes, you'll mess up, but God allows mulligans! Step up and try again! But – you must try!

Now, let's get personal! What about you? I'm sure many of you have defined you talents, what you are good at; abilities that come easy to you. But, what have you done with them? How seriously have you taken them? Now, don't go saying, "I don't have any talents, any abilities! Or at least any worth while." Yes you do! God has given you talent/talents, get busy and use them!

Have you ever thought or said, "Better not to risk, better not to fail, better to just keep things the way they are, it's safer that way?" Have you ever felt that way? However you define "talent", have you ever felt that it's just easier to leave well enough alone, and not risk rocking the boat. "So what if I feel I could do such and such - what if I don't make it, or if I fail? I better not."

This brings us to this morning's gospel text. Jesus is in his teaching mode. This is one of three parables given one after the other. Keep in mind parables are stories with a twist. Parables are stories that put you on shaky ground. Just when you think you're following the plot, surprise, the rug is pulled out from under you. And this parable is no exception.

Jesus shares his thinking of what God's reign is like. What God expects of us. Apparently it's serious business! There is also the issue of judgment in these parables. There is a sense of emergency in all of this. Jesus explains that the reign of God, the purpose of God, is like a traveling property owner, who entrusts his property to his servants. To the one servant he gives 5 talents. (Notice, originally a talent was a measure of weight and developed into a monetary unit of the highest denomination. A talent was equal to the total wages of a person who labored from 15 to 38 years. A talent was a large sum of money. Also, as the word traveled through the centuries, it became synonymous for a person's abilities, gifts. Hence, talents today. Etymologically it began with the sense of great value.)

The second servant was given two talents.

The third servant was given one talent.

Servants one and two doubled their talents, while servant three dug a hole and buried his talent.

Sometime later the owner came back. Instead of five talents, 10 are returned. Instead of two talents, four are returned. The owner of course is quite pleased. In fact, he is overjoyed. And now the third servant. What about him? “Well, sir, your reputation had preceded you, and so out of fear I buried your talent so as not to lose it. Here you go, it’s all yours! Here’s you one talent! The owner replies, “Sure. Thanks for protecting my talent. You didn’t have much to begin with, so my lad, thanks for taking care of it.” Not quite. Here’s the twist. The owner is incensed! “You wicked and slothful servant! How could you? Give me that talent! Here you with 10, have another! Get rid of this guy!” Whoa! Where did that come from? The servant was just trying to keep the owner’s money safe!

But being safe is not the answer to God’s reign. Out of fear the third servant buried his talent. He was to go for the green! Instead he sat on the sideline.

Fear often causes paralysis. It keeps us from risking, from taking chances to be creative and helpful. In terms of living in fear, Jesus is describing that we do so at a great cost. Does that relate? Does that hit home? “Well, I would like to try...but no I better not. What if I fail?” Fear keeps us from acting on our potential. And this parable exposes fear as destructive to our lives.

Whatever talents you have been blessed with, do not waste them, do not neglect them. They are God-given! Be responsible! Use your talents. Increase their effects. Do not be fearful. Do not be afraid to risk using your abilities! It’s up to you! Only you can make the decision to use your talents! Others will be there to help, to guide, but you must go for the green!

Yes, take your mulligans – God understands.

Apparently God does expect you to be responsible to yourself. What you have been given you need to cultivate and use. In fact, (and this rings true on a multiple of levels) if you have been extremely blessed with talents, more is expected of you!

Greater talents – greater responsibility!

Also, to diminish your talents is harmful to all. Wherever you fit – 5, 2, 1 talents – get busy! Do not underestimate yourself! God won’t.

Take your mulligans – but always go for the green!

Amen.