

LESSONS FROM THE GOLF COURSE  
Psalm 34; Romans 12:1-3, 9-18  
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This morning's sermon got its start as I contemplated the annual Fish Creek Invitational Golf Tournament and looked at the 2<sup>nd</sup> place trophy I've now had for a few years. You've heard the old saying, "Man's extremity is God's opportunity." Well, I will again give God a chance. When the tournament begins I will be going back to the golf course after a long absence. That is not necessarily catastrophic in itself. The trouble is that I will go back to the golf without acknowledging any need for the renewal of my driving and my putting before I return to the course. I know I will step up to the first tee without having practiced at all. And that will prove to be this man's extremity.

As I contemplated all of this I remembered the story told of a rabbi and a priest playing golf. Before putting, the priest crosses himself. By the ninth hole he is nine strokes ahead. So the rabbi asked if the priest thinks it would be all right if he too crossed himself. "Sure, rabbi, go ahead," said the priest. "But it won't do you any good until you learn how to putt."

Though golfwise it might be a ghastly experience, sermonwise it was most productive, for it renewed my sense of need for a strong sense of the need for renewal. Now, you missed the whole point if you infer that I learned a new lesson. What I learned for the 100th time was that the old, old lessons are forever having to be re-learned. There are no permanent victories in this world in putting or in praying. Everything about your life and mine stands repeatedly in need of renewal. Our friendships as well as our fingernails, our courage as well as our blood count, our integrity as well as our spirits, our will to will God's will as well as our subscription to the New York Times.

But why is it so? Why is it we have to keep forever re-learning the fact that we have to keep re-learning? As far as golf is concerned, any instructor would emphasize from the beginning the absolute necessity of keeping up on your homework. No reputable golf teacher would hold out any illusions about proficiency once and for all after ten easy lessons. We all well know that broad are the fairways and sandy are the traps that lead to destruction.

Just so, the apostle Paul, held out no lure of ten easy lesson plans for permanent victory for neophyte Christians. With tremendous vigor, he exhorted the Romans in his letter to them, "With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers and sisters, as an act of intelligent worship, to give God your bodies as a living sacrifice, consecrated to God and acceptable by God. Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God remold your minds from within so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all God's demands, and moves toward the goal of true maturity."

And yet, though reminded of the need for renewal, consistently we neglect and forget the reminders. Why? My own personal hunch is that we just plain resent, and therefore resist, the notion that the need for renewal is built into life. It's just more of those encounters with the large segment of life we cannot control, and therefore resent. It's one of those laws of life we cannot

repeal, and therefore despise. It's another one of those marks of our finiteness that we do our best to deny. Grudgingly, we may admit that there are no permanent victories, but poutingly we keep arguing with ourselves and others that there ought to be. Some of the things we do ought to stay done. At the very least, that bicycle ought to be out of the driveway, those tools ought to be in the garage where they belong, those clothes ought to be hung in the closet and not on the floor. How many of us start out as hopeful young parents with naive notions that such permanent victories ought to be possible?

As the parent of a now grown son you would think I would have accepted this as a fact of life. I remember once seeing a delightful book entitled, "I'm Telling You Kids for the Last Time." How many hundreds of times do you suppose the average parent has said that - once more with feeling - this time with the certainty that it was going to be for real and forever - "I'm telling you kids for the last time."

But resistance to this need for constant renewal is typical, not just of the relationship of parents to children, but of husbands and wives as well. I think one of the unhappiest phrases in the English language is that phrase that's frequently used of newlyweds - "They're settling down into marriage." By the time most newlyweds get their last gift unwrapped, the only thing they can think to do with their marriage is to settle down. Curiously enough, that concept of marriage is combined in our culture with a concept of dating that is one of the most vigorously romantic and imaginative in all the cultures of the world. Some years ago, an oriental writer noticed this contrast between the vigorous way we court and the bland way we act after marriage. He began to compare this combination with his own pattern. At that time in his culture, practically no courtship at all took place before marriage, but after the marriage the couple then entered into the exciting business of drawing close to one another. Noting the difference between these two combinations, the writer said, "In the West you put a hot kettle on a cold stove; in the East we put a cold kettle on a hot stove."

But now, having said all this, let's walk around our morning subject and look at it from the opposite side. If it is true, as I insist it is, that we resent and therefore resist this need for renewal, that is not all that is true of our response to this built-in law of life. I think equally apparent is the opposite fact. The very pressures of the world, without and within us, bend us inevitably to accept and satisfy the need for renewal in innumerable ways. The simple truth is that most of our lives are spent in the repetition of familiar patterns and the re-learning of old lessons. Much advertising to the contrary, notwithstanding, not many of us vary our breakfast menus much. We tend to shop at the same time in the same stores. We get our hair cut on schedule. Even our mood swings take on a rhythm in their patterns of alternation.

But amid all this repetition, a change is taking place. And the change is in the nature of the patterns we tend to repeat - in the quality of the old lessons we keep re-learning. There is an interesting clue to this change that I call to your attention as we will begin the new fall season in just a few weeks. Have you ever heard or used the phrase, "He does his homework religiously," or "She reads the newspaper religiously?" Well, that phrase used to have a precise meaning. It meant that he does his homework, or she reads her newspaper as conscientiously and as faithfully as they follow their religious devotions. For the assumption was that one thing that everybody

approached religiously was their religion.

In approaching those new fall days, I've been wondering: What would happen if quite literally we began to approach other aspects of our lives the way we approach religion? Suppose some of Knox's members started watching their diets religiously. I can assure you from their attendance record at worship services that some of them would end up living on a religious weight watchers diet of Easter eggs and Christmas fruitcakes.

Or suppose some of Knox's members starting practicing their putting religiously. Oh, some of them would end up as inept golfers, as the one that I will prove to be. The sad truth is that the pattern of devotion among us would be improved if some of our members started watching their religion dietetically and others started saying their prayers puttingly.

But lest this sound more facetious than I mean it to be, let me state the problem in the language of the text. One of the most common ways by which the world squeezes us into its mold is by squeezing out of our daily routine any adequate pattern by means of which we renew our vision of greatness - the vision that we are meant to present our beings as living sacrifices to Almighty God. If we are not careful to keep our eyes wide open to the mercies of God, instead of presenting ourselves to God as living sacrifices, one day we come to in the rough, sadly to realize that in actual expenditure of time and attention, we've been doing a much better job of renewing our fingernails than our friendships and our subscription to the New York Times than our will to will God's will.

But the positive point is that the world cannot do this to us unless we let it. There are ways we can keep our eyes wide open to the mercies of God. Do you remember Susannah Wesley's vigorous definition of sin? "Whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, or takes the relish off of spiritual things - that is sin for you." Well, we can take that statement and turn it on its affirmative feet. Whatever strengthens your reason, sensitizes your awareness of the tenderness of your conscience, clarifies your sense of God, or sharpens your appetite for spiritual things, that is salvation for you. But how are we to keep the world from squeezing us into its own mold by making room for such reminders of God's mercies?

Part of the answer is that we shall need deliberately and consistently to look for spaces of time in which to look for, and at such reminders. I recall that Elton Trueblood wrote, "One of the best secrets of the discipline of time is the fuller date book." This seems at first like a gratuitous paradox, but appears upon reflection to be most reasonable. If a person will go through his or her datebook and fill in empty places with really important commitments, including those to meditation, to solitude, to prayer, to writing, to his friends, to her family members - the temptations to scatter energies will be more easily resisted.

Dr. Trueblood suggests not only that we keep a fuller date book, but that that date book be filled with some of the best of the time-tested practices by which our vision of spiritual greatness can be renewed: meditation, solitude, prayer, writing. And others I would add to this list are: frequent and regular participation in acts of corporate worship, participation in adult continuing

education opportunities and openness to fellowship opportunities for nurture and growth.

But along with this full calendar deliberately constructed to include those opportunities to keep ourselves awake to God's mercies, I would hold out as well for certain spaces in that schedule for those means of spiritual renewal that are our own peculiar forms by which we hear the music that sets us marching. My own list would include reading all kinds of published materials, rejoicing in the change of seasons, time with children and traveling. But I wouldn't belabor my particular list. What I would underscore is the importance of the fact that I have such a list and that you have such a list, too.

There are many times in my life when I have not been impressed with my particular choices. And so when I will have that ghastly experience on the golf course, perhaps it will give me the jolt that I need to remind me of my need for renewal on the golf course. That is the reason this summer season I beg of you, my brothers and sisters, with eyes wide open to the mercies of God' let's not let the world squeeze us into its own mold, but let us let God remold us from within - for God will do it if we give God the chance. And that's a pretty good golf lesson. I'll see you in a few weeks – and thanks be to God. Amen.