

Sermon – 6th Easter/Confirmation
John 14:15-22
May 21, 2017

“One Bad Swing”

All that remained was about two hours of work. To you and I extraordinarily difficult work, but to a 22 year old professional golfer named Jordan Speith, nothing insurmountable. He'd played one of the toughest golf courses in the world – Augusta National in Augusta, Georgia, as well as anyone had for two straight years. He'd won the title in 2015 and it was all but certain he'd do it again. With only 9 holes to play he held a 5 stroke lead, huge by golf standards. It was Jordan and the course – a couple hours on a nice spring afternoon, he'd be champion again, and with the title a place in the history books of his sport as one of only four golfers to win the Masters tournament in consecutive years.

And then it happened – “*one bad swing*” he later called it – a swing which then, as golfers say “*got into his head*” and led to another bad swing, and then one or two more. Over only three holes he'd surrendered his 5 stroke lead and found himself trailing. He steadied himself but could not recover. He ran out of time – measured in golf by holes – and lost. “*A colossal meltdown*” – “*the most shocking collapse in golf history*” is how the news media reported it. And then Jordan faced the ultimate indignity of having to attend the award ceremony after the tournament was over and as defending champion present the trophy to the new champion – knowing full well it should have been him. I can't imagine how isolated and empty he felt.

Just as in golf the nice “Sunday stroll” your life seems to be on one minute can become in the next a moment you wish you could do over or just forget. With personal failure guilt is bad enough, but such experiences can erode a person's confidence – in themselves particularly –or in the people or systems that should have prevented or protected them – and yes, for people of faith - in God. “*One bad swing*” is a golf metaphor but it works for life. One bad moral decision, one bad day on the job, one bad argument at home, one bad Instagram post, one glance at our cell phone when we should've been looking at the road can become a ‘*failure and shame*’ moment.

Commentators called the “*one bad swing*” of Jordan Speith's “*a mistake he never makes*” – only he did. Been there, done that anyone? What causes you to make a mistake you never make – you know, that moment when you hang your head and say “*I should have seen that coming.*” And why does God allow people (like you) who trust in him to fail? In the 14th chapter of the gospel of John, despite three years of private lessons listening and watching Jesus live a selfless life of service even to his enemies and doing things that only God could do, two of Jesus' disciples, Thomas and Philip say things I bet they wished they' hadn't. Thomas, after Jesus announced his impending death no less than three times had said “*Lord we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?*” Philip after three years of miracles one ups that by saying to Jesus – “*Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied.*”

Talk about taking a bad swing at what Jesus' life and message was about. Thomas and Philip shanked it bad – they missed by a mile who Jesus was they'd been practicing with him every day. Jesus tried to correct their swing by saying “*if you have seen me you have seen the Father – follow me and you'll be doing everything God requires of anyone.*” But he ended the lesson says “*no matter what...you'll never be alone – you will never be “orphaned.”*” Imbedded in those words is the hope of any person and every person who confesses Jesus as Lord. Jesus will not abandon sinners who take bad swings in their life. Would that it was only “one bad swing” – but the truth is our swings are all messed up. Our lesson says we need to aim at the right things – God's commands. We need to set up our lives according his word. What God saw in Jesus he wants copied so he placed the teacher - the Spirit of Jesus in you.

Translation - your human nature, with all its bad swings, your human heart with all the emotional shots it takes, does not have to correct itself. You may not understand everything about God – you may struggle mightily doing what God wants, but you are not struggling alone. Professional golfers, even though they look darn near perfect to the casual observer, make bad swings and they all have swing coaches who watch them constantly. They don't compete alone. Neither do you. If it were not so would Jesus have told you he will not leave you orphaned?

I don't know what the future holds for Jordan Speith – he hasn't enjoyed a lot of golfing success since last year's Masters - bad swings can take a while to recover from eh? But I listened to an interview he did right after the tournament. He fielded tough questions and didn't hide his disappointment in his performance. Fascinating to me however was how of his own personal fiasco he talked using the plural – which some would call a copout, but what he meant was that he lost *and* won with the person who accompanies a professional golfer on every round – his caddie –who advises them on virtually every shot of every round.

He said “*there is no give up in us...we tried....it was just one bad swing.*” He talked of “we” and “us” despite the fact it was his bad swing. And that got me thinking – as Christians we don't suffer or succeed alone – or shouldn't anyway. Jesus used together language in our lesson today - my Father in me and I in you. Golf may be an “I” sport, but the church to whom Jesus addresses his words today is a “we” thing. Sure, your faith is personal. Sure, we're asking our 8th graders Natalie, Conner and Jared to individually affirm “their faith.” But it is the faith of the church we ask them to affirm, the faith we all once received- the hope for another shot at it tomorrow we all need.

We think of one another all the time in the church - at least we should or we're not the church Jesus intended. As he began to “*unravel*” in his final round at the Masters, several television commentators, many former professional golfers themselves, admitted they started to root for Jordan. They knew what he was going through. As a matter of first importance we the church sinners all, affirm that one bad swing, and another, and yes even another, does not separate us from the one community – the church - that knows what those feel like – nor above all from the Master who loves us in spite of them – perhaps all the more because of them. AMEN