

Playing Golf with Paul

(Who's your caddy)

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I love golf. I truly love to play golf even though there are days it drives me crazy. The problem is that I play golf in a way that Paul describes in his passage to the Romans. The things that I should do, I do not do. The things I should not do, I do.

I know the mechanics, I've read innumerable articles about for example putting. Yet I am not very good. I will hit the ground just before I strike the ball and change the angle of the club head. Or I will push the ball left because I do not bring the putter straight through. I know better, but still I fail.

Now for really spectacular examples of this I can take out my driver. Don't worry I'm not going to hit a ball in here with this. Now I bought a pretty decent driver that the pro said would help me hit the ball farther and he said by the way, I can fix that slice for you. So he gave me some suggestions and when I can put it all together and do what he told me, then yes I can hit a nice drive, straight and true. The other day playing with Barry I had two great drives in a row. On the next hole I thought, well with a little more club speed I can really get some distance. Well I didn't get my wrists through, so the club face was twisted when I hit the ball and standing on the 17th tee I watched my ball in an elegant arc fly over the trees drop on the 15th fairway.

Now I know to let the club do the work and not try to force the swing, but there I went, wanting that extra yardage and ended up having to chip back onto the 17th fairway and any hope of a par was long gone.

So it often is when we try to follow what God wants from us, what God desires for us. We try to do it our way and end up with a penalty shot of some sort. Richard Rohr in a meditation I read this week talked about us wanting to be God, wanting to be in control, to play our way because in our arrogance we think we know best. Paul here is saying that no, God knows best and we need to do what God desires us to do and that anything that attempts to pull us away is sin.

The Message Bible translates the final verse of our Roman's passage like this. "The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different."

I believe that this passage is linked with our gospel in Matthew because of the teaching that Jesus is the one who connects us with the father and the father's desire for us. Then he uses the image of the yoke.

Now there is often confusion about the image of the yoke. Jesus has spoken previously and will speak later of the heavy burdens being laid on the people by the Jewish authorities. These are burdens of the law as he describes them.

We view the idea of a yoke as a burden and something that is oppressive, but Jesus says that his yoke is easy and the burden is light. How does this work?

A finely trained yoke of oxen are a thing of beauty to see in action. I remember seeing just such a yoke at Williamsburg on one of my many trips there. The person doing the demonstration explained that a good pair of oxen, carefully trained to work together was worth more than the two oxen individually. They almost danced together with the person who was leading them. The pair if well matched could produce the equivalent power of three. One is usually the lead ox and there is definitely a right side and a left side to the pair. When they first start to work together it is not a thing of beauty. They look more like I would if I tried to dance with a partner. You don't want to see that. I'm far better off for everybody playing in the band, but of course that is what I was trained to do! With gradual training they learn to work together.

The challenge in today's world is to get us all working together, pulling in the same direction. Wendy and I used to walk our dogs in a place called Thompson's field up on Cape Cod. Several of the dogs we walked with were retrievers of a variety of sorts. There were several of them, in particular Luke and Cosmo who were happiest walking the field with a large stick in their mouth. Quite often the two of them would pick up opposite ends of a stick and go galloping off across the field. Sometimes however they would grab opposite ends, but would face opposite directions. They would then attempt to run, but all that happened was that they would go around and around in a great circle. We would laugh at them until one would finally let go or they would collapse in an exhausted heap in the field.

Yoked together our burden is lighter than when we try to accomplish the same thing individually. The challenge is getting us all going in the same direction towards the same goal. That is what our visioning team is working on and will be working with all of you in the coming months. How can we as a parish be yoked together in ways that will move us forward towards our goal of being a parish that makes the kingdom of God a reality for our community?

Our own ministries are always made easier when we are yoked together with another person or a team. Solo ministries tend to crash and burn from fatigue. This is why I try so hard to get more than one person in a leadership position for any given project. We work best as a team, yoked together and those ministries

that are struggling often are led by a single person. They do their best, but ultimately it is often too much.

Being yoked to Jesus keeps us headed in the right direction and in fact makes the work easier. Of course this means that Jesus needs to be the lead ox in the yoke. We are not the ones in charge. You may remember a bumper sticker I referred to one time that said if God is your co-pilot, move over. We are always the co-pilot on this journey. We are yoked to Jesus, but Jesus is always the one in the lead. If we keep this image in mind then the struggles of Paul are much easier to manage for there is always a leader and a follower in any good team of oxen.

On this July 4th weekend I am reminded that we need each other and that is true of this parish, this community and our country. We need to be yoked together and all moving in the same direction. If there is a prayer that I could offer today, it is that we can all work together to move forward.

This is what our parish is called to do, with Jesus as our partner. Now if he could only help with that slice of mine.