

Romans 15:1-6  
Philippians 1:12-14-19-30

Rev. Don Hilkerbaumer  
Covenant Presbyterian Church  
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### “WE PLAY OUR FOUL BALLS”

I love summer because it is the season for golf and baseball—my two favorite sports. My love of baseball started when I was only five years old and living in rural Missouri. I was with my dad at the General Store in the little village of Hope and we were talking to a couple of men after they had been hunting. When the conversation was over and we were walking home, my dad told me that we were talking to two St. Louis Cardinal players. One of them turned out to be the Hall of Famer, Red Schoendienst. This was the beginning of my love of the St. Louis Cardinals.

My love of golf came much later but these two sports come together in a story about the great baseball legend Ted Williams and world golf Hall of Famer, Sam Sneed. As they were playing a round of golf, they had an argument about which game was harder to play, baseball or golf. Williams contended that hitting a baseball was a much greater athletic achievement than hitting a golf ball. He said it was just common sense.

He made his case, saying that many times, the baseball is coming at you at speeds well over 90 miles an hour and it is thrown by an opponent who is deliberately trying to confuse or trick you. It can have at least three different kinds of spin on it. You only have a split second to make up your mind and swing the bat and even if you do hit the ball, there are nine players out there trying to keep you from getting a safe hit.

Williams continued saying that on the other hand there is the golf ball sitting on a tee, quietly waiting for you to swing at it. You have lots of time to concentrate on what you propose to do. You have time to recall all the things essential to a good drive—keeping your shoulders level, your head down, your eye only on the ball. No human is out there to intervene between you and your goal. Neither is there a stadium full of people yelling for you or against you. They even put signs up to keep people quiet.

To be sure there are trees and water hazards and bunkers, but there’s no human opponent wanting to kill your drive. But, about this time, Ted Williams hooked his drive. His ball ended up in a sand trap, just short of a water hazard and under some trees.

Finally, Sam Sneed spoke, **“You know Ted, the tough thing about hitting a golf ball is that you have to play your foul balls.”**

I suppose it is difficult to argue with that, whether we are on the golf course, or in life. There are so many times in our lives when “things happen”—something breaks, mistakes were made, there’s a detour sign in your path, your ball lands in a hazard or the economy changes, and we’re working to get ourselves out of difficulty one more time. In golf and in life we have to play the lie of the ball from where we find it. It doesn’t mean that all is lost, but it means we can’t start over with only an additional strike on us as like a foul ball in baseball. In golf we learn to live with the consequences of our actions, of our hook or slice.

Some of what has happened to us in life has been pleasant, grace-filled blessings, dreams come true; other things have been decidedly unpleasant, difficult, heart-breaking. Some of our hopes and dreams have been realized; but some we have reason to suspect will never happen in this lifetime.

As we look over our years and the things that have happened to us, the question is how these things have affected us, our disposition and reactions, our approach to life... Are we kinder, more peaceful, less angry? Do we have more patience with the people around us? Are we less anxious and fearful, more forgiving? What has affected our character?

Have we grown closer to God or are we farther away? Do we demonstrate more of the fruits of the Spirit as Paul describes in Galatians: [*But,*] *“the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”* (Galatians 5:22-23) Are we yearning or struggling with our faith? Are we curious, asking questions, or only making judgements?

Paul reflects on the events in his life this way, “What has happened to me” he writes “has really served to advance the gospel.” Paul was one of those persons who had to play life’s foul balls. He was a young man with a brilliant career before him. Then on the road to Damascus his life was turned up-side down. He became a

disciple of the very man whose followers he had been persecuting. Then during his ministry, he was mobbed, shipwrecked, beaten, imprisoned, and scheduled for execution.

“What has happened to me,” Paul says *“will turn out for my deliverance.... because for me, living serves Christ and dying is even better.”*

Paul certainly had to deal with the changing circumstances of his life, and he saw that in it all things, God worked through him to advance the gospel. Somehow God gave Paul the ability to encourage others, to bring out their best gifts, even when life was extremely difficult for him.

In all of our lives there are problems and issues that we have to overcome...whether it's a problem with money...a job...relationships...health issues... sadness and sorrow—all of these events of one sort or another can drive divisions deep into our hearts and minds.

What happened to Paul as he faced painful and difficult times turned out to promote the progress of the gospel. Why? It was because God's Spirit attracted people to Christ and through Paul's endurance people were inspired to witness for Christ and to experience a deep relationship to Christ in their lives.

Tony Campolo tells this story: “I was in an airport in New Mexico. This elderly woman was sitting there, sad as could be. I went over and sat next to her and tried to cheer her up. Others in this small airport gathered around and we all got her laughing. She couldn't stop. Her friend finally arrived on this little commuter airplane and she hugged her friend and bade us good-bye. She got into the car and drove away. I was looking out the glass door and unexpectedly, the car came back up the lane.

She got out, came up to me and said, "Mister, you didn't know this, but it was three years ago today that my husband of sixty-four years died. I didn't realize it until I was on the way home that today is the first day since then that I've been able to laugh. I wanted to come back and thank you. Campolo says: “Friends, it may be something like that, that the world doesn't see as significant, but that may be ultimately significant in the long run. We need to encourage each other, to bring out our best gifts, especially when life is distressing.”

Paul reminds us that we matter. These scripture lessons from Paul this morning are Paul's words of encouragement written from prison and they have been passed down to us with good reason. They are encouragement for us as we face life's difficult places and at the same time, they model a way of living and a way of being the church in which we are called to serve by being encouragers of others. We're Christ's partners. We are each other's partners. In this way we too, are advancing the gospel.

When life is increasingly difficult and the evil forces seem to be winning, with Christ as our center ...we are called to inspire each other, to support one another, and yes even to struggle and sometimes disagree with each other in order to discern the best ways to confront the issues of our world.

Paul wants disciples to know that they matter, we matter and how we live matters. You and I are changing the world by just being on this planet, by living and breathing. And we have choices. We can allow our lives, our values, our attitudes to be shaped and formed entirely from the outside forces of the world around us. Or we can open ourselves to be reshaped from the inside out by the wind and breath of the Spirit of God.

As a pastor, I believe that God created us in God's image and that we as people of God and we have tremendous possibility and we can learn something about life through all our experiences. They call that wisdom...

It has been said, “that the same sun that melts wax hardens clay.” The same is true for us. Our brokenness can make us hardened and embittered becoming more cynical, and angry in response to the world around us. Or we can become more empathic, compassionate, loving people. It is our choice.

There's an old story about a renowned pianist and composer - a famous one who lived at the beginning of the last century - and a significant thing that happened at the start of one of his concerts. At this particular concert a woman and her young son came to hear this great pianist play. The young boy had only recently begun his piano lessons, and the mother, wishing to encourage his studies, took him to the concert.

The two were seated just prior to the concert, but the mother spotted a dear friend along the aisle a few rows back and went to speak to her, telling the boy to wait in his seat. But, then, what child likes to sit still? And so, seizing the moment of opportunity to explore a bit, the boy made his way down the aisle, through an open curtain in a doorway and disappeared.

The houselights dimmed and the mother returned to her seat, discovering as she did, that her son was not in his seat. She began frantically to look all around, not paying attention to the curtains opening on stage. But at the laughter of the audience, she looked, and there, seated at the magnificent Steinway on the stage, was her son, haltingly playing the first song he had learned to play: "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star."

The mother was horrified, and started to get up; but at that same moment the great pianist himself entered from the other side of the stage, putting his finger to his mouth to still the audience. He moved to the piano and whispered in the boy's ear. The boy kept playing, and then this great pianist reached down with his left hand and began filling in a bass part to the composition. Soon his right arm reached around to the other side of the child and he added a running obbligato. Together the old pianist and this young novice transformed an awkward moment into a moment of grace, and as they finished playing, the audience broke forth in thunderous applause and a standing ovation.

May we too find that we are surrounded by such loving grace, that our fumbling gifts and efforts can be transformed by the Spirit into beautiful music. May we hear those whispers of remarkable encouragement, whispers to us to keep playing...to persevere...to play **our** foul balls and to face life with grace... Like Paul, may we stand firm in the one Spirit, striving side by side, having one mind, for the faith of the gospel. So may it be for you and me...grace and peace from the Lord Jesus Christ...Amen

References:

Campolo Tony, 30 Good Minutes Archives of Wheaton College  
Rupert Hoover, *Play Your Foul Balls*, Presbyterian Outlook