

Golf is really a three letter word that spells “FUN.” There’s something so exciting about being with friends and meeting the challenges of the course. What a wonderful, albeit temporary, escape from the realities of life. And yet, while golf typically takes one away from their troubles, there is a sense in which it is a paradigm of life. For golf is FUN, but not all the time. The sun shines, but sometimes it rains. There are beautiful holes balanced by ugly ones. And while there is success there is also failure.

One of the parallels between golf and life is the so called “hazard.” A hazard is defined in the *Rules of Golf* as “any bunker or water hazard.” A hazard in golf is an obstruction, something that gets in the way of one’s passage. The object in golf is to stay away from the hazards.

Life has its hazards and the object is much the same, to stay away. Discipleship, as a part of life, poses hazards, as well. The Gospel today points to one of them which is to pay more attention to the crowd than Jesus himself. This is to allow the crowd more of an influential role than Jesus. Jesus was aware of this challenge, so much so that he asks his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

Jesus then digs a bit deeper and becomes more specific with this question. For he says to his disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” In a certain sense, this question is a test. Peter emerges with the correct answer, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Peter’s response becomes a personal profession of faith. Jesus, for his part, calls Peter “Blessed” and gives him the keys to the kingdom and makes him the “rock” of his Church.

What is interesting about this Gospel passage is not only the question posed by Jesus, but also the place where it was posed, namely Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi was about 25 miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee. While the population was mainly non-Jewish, it was nonetheless a very religious place. For example, there were temples dedicated to the ancient Syrian gods. In addition, in Caesarea Philippi there was a great hill inside of which there was a deep cavern that was believed to be the birthplace of the god of nature, Pan. In fact, Caesarea Philippi was so closely identified with this god that its original name was Panias. Furthermore, inside the cave there existed water purported to be the spring of the River Jordan. For pious Jews, this place held a particular religious significance, sparking many memories from the past. Above all, however, in this same district of Caesarea Philippi there was a great temple made of white marble built to the godhead of Caesar. It was the first “Caesars’ Palace.”

It is in this backdrop with its religious surrounding that Jesus asks the big question, “Who do you say that I am?” Even with all of these various gods, Peter is able to stand on his own and say, “You are the Christ.” And in identifying Jesus, Peter’s identity is revealed. “You are the rock.” The sense is that the more one professes their faith in Jesus, the more they come to know who they are.

My brothers and sisters, geographically we are a long way from Caesarea Philippi. And yet, we are surrounded everyday by cultural gods like money, sex, sports, technology, power, and pleasure, just to name a few. It is in this milieu that the Lord asks us, “Who do you say that I am?” One of the hazards we face is the ever present crowd who seeks to take us out of our game and off the course toward heaven. The crowd emerges in the form of TV, the media, lobbyists, neighbors, co-workers, etc. Subtly

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they try to tell us that Jesus is insignificant, a non-entity. When we reach the pearly gates, however, the crowd is not going to do us any good. All that will matter is what we ourselves believe.

Every Sunday it is our privilege to stand here as a faith community and profess our faith. One of the hazards, if you will, to this exercise is repetition. That is, we have said it so many times that we can so easily take it for granted. Instead of it being an expression of faith, it can become just a repetition of words. Remember, through, when we profess our faith, Jesus is essentially saying to each and every one of us, “Who do you say I am?” And that question is not just for Sundays, but everyday of the week.

When we answer that question in the same fashion as Peter, the Lord sends us faith and delegates us to do his work. In fact, the last words uttered by the priest at Mass are, “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord and one another.”

There’s a story about a young Asian man who had a girlfriend who didn’t want to marry him. Over a three year period, this man penned over 700 letters trying to change her mind. Finally, his persistence got results. His girlfriend got engaged to the mailman who delivered the letters. That’s the risk one takes in sending somebody else to do his job.

The Lord has taken a risk with us. Let’s not let him down. And remember, when all is said and done, it’s not about the crowd, it’s about “you.” “Who do you say that I am?”

By the way, watch out for those hazards.