

The Rev. Jack Alvey

### Out of Bounds and Into Grace

There's a great scene in the movie *Tin Cup* where Roy McAvoy, a washed-up driving range pro from West Texas, is warming up before the U.S. Open. And he's got a terrible case of the shanks. For those who don't play golf, a "shank" is a highly technical term for the worst shot ever. It's so bad that uttering the word "shank" on the golf course is practically a mortal sin. A shank happens when the ball bounces off the wrong part of the club and goes who knows where. It's humiliating. It's frustrating. It's demoralizing.

Roy starts shanking one ball after another, almost hitting some of the best players in the world, including a friend-turned-foe, David Simms. He's tried everything to cure the shanks, but nothing works. Instead of giving him a new swing thought or grip, his caddie, Romeo, tells him to do a bunch of ridiculous things: move the change from one pocket to another, tie his shoe in a double knot, turn his hat backward, stick a tee in his ear. Roy says, "I feel like a fool." Romeo fires back, "What do you think you look like shanking chili peppers into Lee Janzen?" With nothing left to lose, Roy does what his caddie says. And suddenly, he starts hitting the ball solid and straight.

"How'd I do that?" he asks. Romeo grins. "You ain't thinking about shanking it... You ain't thinking, period. You just looking like a fool and hitting the ball pure — your natural state." That's when it clicks. Roy doesn't find his swing by trying harder. He finds his swing the moment he lets go.

And that's the paradox of faith, isn't it? The faith and freedom we're after doesn't come from tightening our grip. It comes from letting go. Letting go usually doesn't happen when things are going well. It happens when we've reached our limit, when we've tried everything we know to try, and finally raise the white flag. Like Roy, the ten lepers in today's gospel have reached the end of themselves — they've tried everything they know, but nothing works. They have nothing left to grip. Nothing left to hold onto. Nothing left to count on — except for one thing: the hope of mercy in a world that has been anything but merciful. And that hope — the very thing they cry out for — is standing before them, in the flesh.

Jesus. Mercy incarnate. The one who meets them not with judgment, not with rules, not with "try harder," but with healing, grace, and restoration. They cry, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" They've long passed the point of maintaining dignity — nothing left but a desperate call for help. They have nothing left to lose.

Notice that Jesus doesn't heal them on the spot. He simply says, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." The priests were the ones who could declare you clean. They could restore your place in the community. By sending them off, Jesus is asking them to trust him — to

live as if his healing word is already true. And on the way, all ten are healed. But only one returned. The Samaritan — the one who should have been last in line for mercy — saw something more.

He recognized that what he had received was not just physical healing, but grace itself — an unearned, undeserved gift from God. And because he recognized this grace, he lets gratitude shape him, and it naturally leads him to the source of that grace — to the feet of Jesus. In that moment, he was made whole in body, mind, and spirit.

And just as then, we see that hope in the flesh — Jesus — meets us in our own brokenness today. The same mercy, the same grace, the same presence is alive, waiting for us to let go, to trust, and to receive. As we recalled last week, trust in Jesus begins with even a mustard seed of faith — a mustard seed of faith planted in the promise of Jesus can bring us healing and a whole lot more.

Faith grows not when we figure everything out, but when we finally admit we can't muster faith on our own. This letting go frees us to put our trust in the One who has figured it out for us through his life, death, and resurrection. Through this faith, we grow more convinced that God's grace meets us right where we are, not where we think we should be.

And we usually discover that grace when we finally stop pretending we have it all together, when we're willing to look a little foolish, throw up our hands, and simply say, "Lord, have mercy." And when we encounter that grace, we are meeting again the hope in the flesh — Jesus — who was with the Samaritan, and is still with us, offering mercy, healing, and restoration in every moment.

That's where faith in Christ begins to take root, and where grace can begin to work in us and shape our lives out of gratitude. This is the story of the cross and the empty tomb — God steps into our brokenness on the cross, meeting us when we are powerless — and the empty tomb makes space for us to live a life born out of gratitude, recognizing all of life as a gift.

Grace frees the Samaritan to live with gratitude. We often miss grace when we feel like we've got a good handle on life. We see grace most clearly when we are out of bounds — in the place where we know we can't fix ourselves.

When we find grace there, something in us begins to loosen. As the need to hold on, to figure it all out, begins to fade, we naturally draw closer to the God whose grace is always there, ready to shape us out of a life of gratitude. And in that very place — at the end of ourselves, with nothing left to cling to — we see that Jesus has been here all along: out of bounds, and right in the middle of mercy that's been waiting the whole time.

When we finally let go, we encounter again the hope in the flesh — Jesus — the same mercy and presence who heals, restores, and frees. Roy let go and found freedom. The

Samaritan turned back and found wholeness that comes from a life of gratitude. We, too, discover the same grace when we loosen our grip, when we stop trying to hold it all together, and let gratitude shape us — make us whole, make us pure — returning us to our natural state, the one God always intended.

Amen.