

04/29/185 Easter B

-- Those of you who follow the PGA tour are probably aware that this week's tournament has a unique format. In most tour events, pro golfers play individually for prize money, and they play their own ball.

-- This week, the pros are playing in teams of two. On two days, they play best ball. But on the other two days, they play alternate shot. One hits the drive, the other hits the second shot, and so on and so forth.

-- This format requires a different strategy than individual play. It forces the partners to be connected to each other, to know their strengths and weaknesses. They even need, to some extent, to get into each other's heads, so to speak.

-- Today, Jesus gives us an image of our need to be connected to God's life. We are not individuals travelling a road alone to heaven. We are a part of something bigger. And Jesus holds us all together, like the vine holds the branches together.

-- Our first reading picks up just after Saul (now known as Paul) had experienced his conversion on the road to Damascus. He'd had a vision of Jesus and was ready to go out to preach him as the promised Messiah.

-- But he knew he needed to meet with the apostles in Jerusalem so his teaching would have authority. He could not do this on his own. And the apostles were initially a bit skeptical. After all, this guy had been persecuting him. How did they know he was not a double agent?

-- Fortunately, Barnabas put his faith in him. And Paul was fearless in his preaching. Still, they sent him back to Tarsus, because he needed time to reflect on his experience of conversion before he would go out to the corners of the then-known world.

-- That was all a part of his "pruning." Each of us—in fact, every follower of Jesus—needs pruning. We must be pruned of excessive ego, of our

attachments to things that are passing, of our tendency to hold onto hurts and to nourish grudges, and any other sinful tendency.

-- That is a lifetime process, as it was for St. Paul. But our growth in the Lord requires this pruning process. It's the only way we will bear true fruit for the Lord.

-- And what is that fruit? St. Paul himself speaks of it in Galatians when he says that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

-- I'm sure each of us can look at that list and say we are pretty good when it comes to some of those and much weaker when it comes to others. But that is what the pruning process is all about.

-- Fortunately, we are not in this alone. This is not a "me and Jesus" thing. We have the community of the Church to help us. We come together to worship, to listen to God's word, and to partake of Christ's body and blood. This strengthens us so that we may bear fruit for the Lord.

-- On most PGA tour events, including this week, there is a cut after two rounds. Those in the bottom half of the field at that point don't continue on, and they earn no prize money.

-- Fortunately, the Lord does not abandon us at the halfway point. Yes, God may allow us to be tested, to be pruned by life's difficulties. But God walks with us to the very end of life, hopeful that we will bear fruit.

-- May we continue our journey in hope, staying connected to the vine of Christ's life and the life of the Church. By doing so, we can be confident that we will bear fruit for the Lord—fruit which will be evident to all around us.