

The Blessing Way
(Luke 24:44-53)

Rannulph Junah was the best golfer Savannah had ever seen, until he returned from World War I. Suffering from what we now understand to be post-traumatic stress syndrome, Junah had lost his passion for life. He had also "lost his swing."

As *The Legend of Bagger Vance* unfolds, Junah reluctantly agrees to play in a three-way exhibition match to promote the opening of a world-class resort in his hometown of Savannah. Late one evening, as Junah prepares for what may be the most important tournament of his life, a man mysteriously appears from out of the misty dark night.

Bagger Vance seems to materialize from out of nowhere and offers to be Junah's caddy for "five dollars – guaranteed." Bagger's stated purpose is to help Junah find his swing again. But it soon becomes apparent that Bagger's real mission is to help Junah find himself.

After the first eighteen holes, Junah is a pitiable twelve strokes behind golf legends Bobby Jones and Walter Haugen. The hometown crowd is frustrated with this mysterious Bagger Vance and his very unconventional way of helping Junah. But by the final day of the match, Junah finds his swing and begins to play world class golf again.

As they approach the last green the sun is setting and the match is even. It has suddenly become Junah's game to lose. Then without notice, Bagger tells Junah that it's time for him to leave. Junah wants him to stay, believing that he still needs Bagger's wisdom and guidance. But Bagger says to him, "No you don't."

Bagger then hands over Junah's clubs to a young boy and instructs him to carry on. Like Junah, the boy feels inadequate to the task without Bagger, but Bagger assures both he and Junah that they can finish the match without him. No more words are exchanged as Bagger Vance mysteriously disappears back into the misty Savannah evening that had brought him into Junah's life. Please pray with me.

Christ Jesus, you have blessed us with your presence in this life, revealing to us the God of us all. In your ascension, you have given us the ultimate blessing of life on earth in the light of your kingdom which is coming. Open our hearts and minds to the scripture read and the word proclaimed that we might find meaning for our lives today. In your precious name we pray. Amen.

Bagger Vance "ascends" into the same Savannah mist from which he descended. And Rannulph Junah goes on to win the match. But not before Bagger imparts a blessing on Junah and on the young would-be caddy as they approach the eighteen green.

This is the Sunday on the Christian calendar when we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus Christ. The text for our gospel reading this morning tells the story of the Ascension from Luke's point of view.

The story is filled with as much mystery as the story of the Resurrection. For many Christians, the Ascension explains the absence of the physical

body of Jesus and points back to the Resurrection as new life in a new form. The Resurrection is not simply the resuscitation of a previously dead body. It is new life in a new form – a form which defies scientific explanation.

In the early church, the Ascension created a considerable amount of controversy. Early church doctrine, which survives today, tells us that Jesus ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God.

Ulrich Zwingli, an eighteenth century Reformation theologian, understood the Ascension as literal. He believed that physical body of Jesus literally ascended into heaven and was installed on a throne at the right hand of God. Others believe that the physical body was transformed and it was a spiritual form that ascended into heaven not only to be with God but to live among us as the Risen Christ. Whatever we believe, the Ascension is just one more part of the mystery of our faith.

The Ascension receives little attention compared to the Resurrection at Easter and the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to the point that an important aspect of Luke's account is often overlooked. Listen to what Luke has to say. I'm reading from *The Message*.

⁵⁰⁻⁵¹ He then led them out of the city over to Bethany. Raising his hands *he blessed them*, and while blessing them, took his leave, being carried up to heaven (emphasis added).

"He blessed them." The last thing Jesus did on earth was to bless the disciples. His blessing reaffirms their purpose in the days yet to come. Jesus' blessing filled the disciples with joy and they returned to Jerusalem to await the arrival of the Holy Spirit on

Pentecost which we will observe next Sunday.

Just before Bagger Vance ascended into the misty Savannah night he gave Rannulph Junah the affirmation he needed to find himself and to get on with his life – not just win the exhibition match. Bagger Vance blessed Junah's life. His unexpected and surprising presence in Junah's life was a gift. Just as Jesus' presence in the lives of the disciples and his final blessing was a gift

Jesus' final act on here on earth is nearly inconspicuous, often overlooked in the shadow of other seemingly important acts. Luke would tell us that it was not an afterthought, but a deliberate act intended to send the disciples into a world without Jesus by their side.

In the two thousand years since the historical Jesus walked throughout Palestine, the act of his final blessing has occupied an important role in the life of the Christian church. In our *United Methodist Book of Worship* there are dozens of blessings – for people, animals, places and things. You all receive a blessing each Sunday at the close of worship.

Many churches hold an annual day for blessing people's pets. I know a pastor that every spring set aside a time for the blessing of the bikes – that is, motor cycles – and those who ride them. There is a blessing for a new home, for birthdays, for the retirement of a church mortgage, for the closing of a congregation. There is no limit to the gift of God's blessing in our lives.

In the movie *M*A*S*H* Father Mulcahy blesses the jeep that will carry the GIs safely on their way home from Korea. And it has been suggested that the infamous General George Patton frequently blessed his soldiers who were wounded in battle. Each year I bless the hands of the new graduating class of paramedics at Central Du Page Hospital.

Other cultures practice the act of blessing. In the Navajo tradition there is a very distinct ceremony called the Blessing Way. Tony Hillerman, the author of the mystery series about the Navajo Nation police department, devoted an entire book to the Blessing Way.

A Blessing Way ceremony can be held for anyone going through a major life transition. From graduating high school to turning 50, significant life changes deserve to be acknowledged and celebrated. Many of our traditional ways of recognizing these transitions have become hollow, often dominated by gift-giving and commercialism. A Blessing Way is less about giving gifts and more about communicating from the heart, offering words of encouragement and inspiration to anchor people to God in the face of major life changes.

Today, outside the Navajo culture, the Blessing Way ceremony is being

used in several secular settings. The Blessing Way ceremony is being used to replace the traditional “shower” given for an expecting mother. A quick search of the internet reveals several Blessing Way ceremonies for the heart-felt blessing of mother and child.

In his final act before leaving earth, Jesus blessed the disciples. Through this blessing Jesus has also blessed us. Luke’s gospel has special meaning to us today as we are being called to take seriously the place of blessings in the modern church. Perhaps we could learn from the Navajo Blessing Way and the practice of communicating from the heart-felt words of affirmation and encouragement.

I would like to close my message this morning by praying this special blessing together. Please pray with me and accept this prayer as a blessing for your life.

Navajo Blessing Way Prayer

In beauty may I walk.
All day long may I walk.
Through the returning seasons may I walk.
On the trail marked with pollen may I walk.
With grasshoppers about my feet may I walk.
With dew about my feet may I walk.
With beauty may I walk.
With beauty before me, may I walk.
With beauty behind me, may I walk.
With beauty above me, may I walk.
With beauty below me, may I walk.
With beauty all around me, may I walk.
In old age wandering on a trail of beauty, lively, may I walk.
In old age wandering on a trail of beauty, living again, may I walk.
It is finished in beauty.
It is finished in beauty.