

The Start of Something New: "Rules of the Road"

October 5, 2008

Year A: Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

A police officer was sitting beside the road when he saw a car going by at a slow rate of speed. All of the other cars were passing and blowing their horns. The police officer decided to pull the car over and give them a warning. When he got up to the car he followed it for a short ways and clocked it doing 41 miles per hour. Since the speed limit was 70 he felt that their speed was impeding the flow of traffic and he needed to talk with them.

Turning on his lights, the car swiftly pulled to the side of the road. The officer approached the car and noticed that it had five nuns in it. The youngest appeared to be driving and she was no younger then 70. As he came up to the car he asked her if there was anything wrong.

"No officer. Why?" asked the nun.

"I noticed you were going slow and I thought that something might be wrong," the officer responded.

"Young man," the nun began, "I know that I don't have much experience driving with the job I'm in but I doubt I was going above the speed limit - 41 miles per hour."

"Maim," the officer responded, "that is the route number, not the speed limit."

"Oh!" responded the nun. "I am very sorry. I thought that those signs were the speed limit signs."

The officer then looked in the car and noticed that the other four nuns were shaking like leaves. The officer asked if the other nuns were OK. The driver said that they would be OK for she had just come off route 119 a couple of miles back.¹

In this fall sermon series, *The Start of Something New*, we have been travelling with the Hebrew people starting with their exodus from slavery in Egypt, their escape at the Red Sea, their complaining through the dessert as they inch closer and closer to their Promised Land. In their journey they reach the point where they receive some rules. This may sound familiar to many of us as we share what is commonly known as the 10 Commandments.

[Exodus 20:1-20 \(NRSV\)](#)

Then God spoke all these words:

²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the

¹ "Nun went 119 miles per hour." *Seth's Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations, Part II.* 17.

LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work -- you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³You shall not murder.

¹⁴You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵You shall not steal.

¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

¹⁸When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, ¹⁹and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." ²⁰Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."

Many of us know about rules especially on long road trips. We live here in Chadron and to go anywhere – whether you have children or not – you know it's going to take awhile and it's best to be prepared. You've got to ask yourself: where are the bathroom breaks? How long is the trip, do we need to get out the DVD player? Will the trip be over the meal hour? Do we need snacks? Etc. That's the prep work. Then comes the rules.

In one of our vehicles we have a van that we are trying to sell and Sarah cleaned that thing inside and out. So when we travel in that van there is no food, no drink, no snacks, nothing – that is the rule. It gets hard with children that can't go a few miles without asking, "what did you bring us to eat?"

When we're in the other vehicle, especially if we're driving across the state to see my parents we have one main rule – Don't Kill Each Other! I'm joking here a bit but we try to be serious and tell our girls to be respectful to each other. If you've travelled with children or remember back in those days with your siblings you know there comes that point when someone yells out, "his arm is on my side!" or "Her sleeve is touching me!" When we talk about respect our rule is

we don't want to hear that shrill that can only come from little girls: "Emma" "Cora" . . . Now I realize that our level of violence is mild compared to a car load of boys. I do see some heads nodding here.

I tell you what – we could never get through a car ride without some rules. It keeps the peace. Makes getting to the destination at least tolerable. It allows us from constantly stopping the car and saying, "do you want to walk home?" John, an avid golfer, came in from the course one Saturday. His wife, Mary, asked him with whom he had played that day. He said, "oh, no one in particular."

She asked, "Why don't you play with Bill anymore?"

John replied, "would you like to play golf with someone who throws his clubs, swears all the time, lies about his scores, moves his ball in the rough, and won't stop talking while you're trying to play a shot?"

"Of course not!" said Mary.

John said, "Well, neither does Bill."²

Rules are important. They keep us safe. They allow order to exist in a world that we can not always control. And since we are talking about travel, lets follow that metaphor for a minute. We live on the side of town with lots of one-way streets. Shelton Street is right here and cars only go in the south direction. Because we live right at the corner of 8th & Shelton we see what occurs every day. There are two stop signs at that intersection. Because cars only travel south, those stop signs are facing north at those cars. There is nothing on the other side because that is the rule. We all know that cars on Shelton Street only go south because we know the rule.

Now we can agree that if we travel down 8th Street (which goes by my house) we don't have to stop at Shelton. Traffic – by the rule is supposed to stop on the north side and there should be no cars coming from the south. But what about those rare times when a car does down the wrong direction? We see it – occasionally. In our house we are not supposed to see headlights coming toward us – that's the wrong way. It always catches our attention and because they can not see the stop sign – remember it is facing the other direction – we often see those cars drive right on through the intersection.

Rules are only good if everyone follows them. Rules are only good if we practice them on a daily basis.

Mic MacGuire is a former classmate of mine at Saint Paul School of Theology. Mic is a pretty unassuming guy. You wouldn't know sitting in class with him or hearing him ask a question of the professor that he has quite the celebrated past. At least until he opens his mouth to sing. You see, Mic is a former opera singer. Actually he was one of the ten best in the world before he decided to hang up that lifestyle to become an United Methodist pastor.

Being an opera singer, Mic has a wealth of illustrations from his life. He told us one time about a class he took - an Opereta Apprentice Class. Mic was an accomplished singer already but was looking for ways to better himself. During the first day of class he sat with anticipation. He sat waiting to hear from some of the masters of the Opera world. He wanted to hear how he could become a better singer. How he could be a better actor. He wanted to know the

² *Ibid.*, 22.

practical knowledge of handling agents and fans. Mic wanted knowledge and he wanted to be the best opera singer that these masters were willing to offer him.

Then this Opera Master walks in. “Just looking at him,” Mic says, “you knew he had a wealth of knowledge.” They way he held himself spoke of years of experience in the opera business. Mic sat with anticipation. Finally, he would learn the secrets of being the best in the opera world.

The Master’s first words were: “Take care of your feet.”

“Take care of your feet,” Mic thought. What does “take care of your feet” have to do with being an opera singer. Mic says that he was so shocked to hear these first words that he didn’t hear anything else that Master said.

“Yet,” Mic says, “after spending 100s of hours on my feet in rehearsal and practice and on the stage, I wished I would have listen to this Master’s advice in how to take care of my feet.”³

You’ve heard the old adage – practice makes perfect. I don’t quite agree. Practice does not make perfect unless you view it through the lens of John Wesley. Wesley believed that the walk toward perfection was like reaching maturity. In fact, he said it was living the holy or disciplined life. In our walk with Christ we must practice three standards for faithful living. 1) Do all the good you can. 2) Do no harm. And 3) Follow the principles of God by worshipping and taking communion. Wesley said that if we practice these rules every day – we hope that they will stick. That’s what we do in the car. We practice the rules of respect hoping that they will stick when we get to grandma’s house or to the Mall in Rapid. Practice respect in the car and thus – hopefully – our children will be respectful when the car engine stops. Well, that is the ideal anyway. That, I believe, is where God is coming from here in this passage. Practice these rules now – in the dessert, in your wilderness – and when you arrive in the Promised Land they will stick.

This Wednesday we started our Alpha class and we talked about faith. We talked about when our faith is lacking and many of us agreed it was during a crisis moment. But what happens if we practiced the disciplines of God’s rule every day? Think about this, John Wesley followed a strict schedule of prayer, of devotion, of good works every day! Now I admit that Wesley was pretty anal retentive, but when a crisis moment came in his life he did not panic. In fact, he continued with his routine. You see during those mundane moments of practicing a disciplined faith, Wesley knew that God was with him, even when he was just going through the motions. So when Wesley needed God the most he did not stray from his routine because he knew God would be there for him.

These rules of the road do a few things. 1) they set the Hebrew people a part from their old life and anyone else they come into contact with. Ever take a road trip with someone and you instantly have a bonding experience. 2) They help keep order. 3) They set up practices for daily living. And finally, they do one more thing – they keep hope alive. Think about this, the Hebrew people are pretty sure that God wants them dead in the dessert. In fact, this is again brought up in next week’s lesson. However, why would God create rules if God

³ Mic MacGuire. “Take care of your feet.” *Ibid.*, Part II. 7.

was just going to kill them at the next bend? No, God was keeping hope alive because the Promised Land is coming.

When I was in seminary I took several preaching classes and one theme that always came up was to address what was on people's minds. Folks, the economy is on our mind right now. Bear with me on this metaphor. You have some money in the stock market and your broker tells you, "now is not a good time to take the money out." In fact, he tells you to keep investing. Stocks are low. This is a great time to buy. The economy will turn around. We've got a choice to make. Trust our broker or give in to fear.

Folks, using that same reasoning, I believe, God is looking at the end picture for us. The Promised Land is indeed coming and if we practice our spiritual disciplines now, we will handle any crisis. In fact, practicing these rules – practicing our disciplines – only keeps hope alive.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn the famed Soviet writer needed that discipline, needed that hope to keep himself alive during his stay in a Soviet labor camp. One day his life was so bleak and empty that he was ready to end it all. He was working outside on a slave labor detail and he had decided to provoke a guard into shooting him.

When he sat down for a break, his despair was complete. Then he realized a stranger had sat down beside him, someone he had never seen before and never saw again. For no explainable reason, this stranger took a stick and drew the shape of a cross on the ground in front of them both. Solzhenitsyn sat and stared at the cross. It reminded him of growing up in the Russian Orthodox Church. As a child every day he made the sign of the cross. Every day it became routine. Every day it was just part of his daily practice. But as a child he did not know that the sign of the cross would keep him alive that day. That day when he saw the cross his spirit was quickened by the presence of Christ who died to make everyone free and whole. He said fresh courage flowed through him and the will to live returned. He was determined to bring love and hope to that barren labor camp – which he did!⁴

Follow God, practice these rules, and folks hope will come. We will get to our Promised Land. Amen.

⁴ Dan Safarik. "Hope came from the cross." *Ibid., Part V.* 33.