

One of the great rites of passage in American culture is when a teenager gets his or her driver's license. It takes the patience of Job to sit through the endless waiting at the DMV, nerves of steel to convince the tester that you can actually drive a vehicle, and you need to be able demonstrate that you have a rudimentary knowledge of the rules of the road when taking the written test. Successfully navigate this labyrinth of bureaucratic stress and you become the proud owner of a special plastic card that demonstrates to the world that you're a licensed driver and also that you're quite capable of having a bad hair day.

While most of the United States observes most traffic laws in common, like driving on the right side of the road, and actually stopping at stop signs, there are nuances in some of the rules that tend to vary from state to state. In some states, for instance, the laws on the books can be downright goofy. Consider these weird rules if you're planning a road trip this coming summer.

- In Little Rock, Arkansas, "no person shall sound the horn on a vehicle at any place where cold drinks or sandwiches are served after 9 p.m." - Decades ago, it was illegal for a woman to drive down Main Street in Waynesboro, Virginia, without her husband walking in front of the vehicle waving a red flag. - In Oregon, it's perfectly acceptable to make a left turn on red as long as you're turning onto a one-way street. - In Minnesota, it's illegal to cross state lines with a duck on your head. – And Tennessee has a law that prohibits shooting at animals from a car, unless that animal happens to be a whale.

Sure, it's hard to imagine any circumstance where you'd need to use a duck for a hat or drive a camel on the highway (which apparently is illegal in California), but there are still plenty of rules of the road that are essential if you're going to make it safely to your destination. The key, however, is to translate those rules from the driver's manual, into practical experience so that obeying them

becomes second nature. That takes practice, because no one will be running in front of you waving a red flag to warn others of your approach!

The traffic laws in Jesus' day were a whole lot less stringent and weird, since most people of the poorer classes traveled by foot. Jesus may have walked thousands of miles in his lifetime, all without ever honking a horn or making a left on red. But, as he traveled, he began to define a different set of rules for those who would follow him on those ancient roads, and for those of us who follow him today. The story we read in our gospel lesson from John illustrates that Jesus' rules of the road are timeless, and vitally important, if we're going to stay on the right track as his disciples.

Our story this morning opens with Jesus on the road from the place of his baptism (likely on the Jordan River near the Dead Sea) back to Galilee, his home territory. The road running along the Jordan was the main north-south route through the region, and Jesus and his followers would have traversed it many times on the way to and from Jerusalem, for the various Jewish festivals and feasts they attended. Having been baptized by John and commissioned for his mission, Jesus traveled north with Andrew and Simon Peter, his first two disciples, in tow.

Even though Galilee is their destination, we know that Jesus has a much longer journey in mind. In Bethsaida, the hometown of Andrew and Peter, Jesus encounters two men to whom he will also teach the rules of the road -- three rules to which everyone since has been compelled to adhere to if they're going to become licensed disciples of Jesus. In fact, we could argue that these are the most important rules ever put on the books:

Rule #1: We are to FOLLOW. "Follow me Jesus says." This first rule is the equivalent of Jesus holding up a red flag and waving it in front of those who would come after him. Note that it's always said in the imperative – in other words it is not a suggestion or a request but a command. It's not simply "believe in me,"

"think about me" or "consider me." It's an order and that order directs us to "follow." To be a disciple of Jesus sometimes means that we are called to leave the route we are currently on, to take a narrow, one-way road behind him instead.

Philip is the first to hear this clearly-stated rule in John's gospel, although we do hear Jesus using those two simple words of command to the disciples elsewhere in the gospels. Unlike in those other stories where the disciples drop their nets, or get up from the table and start falling in behind Jesus, Philip's first response to this rule is to go and get another follower. So compelling is this rule, that Philip recognizes that it's one that everyone needs to observe in order to make it safely to their eternal destination.

The first person Philip tells, is Nathanael who, interestingly, doesn't appear in any of the other gospel lists of the Twelve. John's point might be that Jesus' command to "follow me" isn't just for those original twelve disciples, but that it is for everyone. Philip immediately sees that Jesus is the one "whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote about, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Jesus, in other words, is the one to whom all the ancient Scriptural rules of the road point. Nathanael, however, sees the idea of a Messiah coming from Nazareth to be about as likely as a whale in Tennessee. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" he scoffs.

Following Jesus means picking one direction – better yet, picking one *person* -- to follow. It's the equivalent of veering off the superhighway of life and driving down a dirt road, which is why it's a major deviation from the rules everyone else is following. Later in John's gospel Jesus will say, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." It's not as if Jesus is the only way, as many interpret this passage, but rather that Jesus is calling people to follow him on the one road that leads straight to the heart of God and God's mission.

Too often we've defined the rules of Christian faith in terms of what we believe about Jesus, instead of focusing on actually following him, and doing as he does. Information is important, but imitating Jesus is really the heart of discipleship. The only way we can really know what he is about is by going all in, pushing down the accelerator and following him, which leads us to the second rule:

Rule #2: We are invited to Come. Philip responds to Nathanael's skepticism with an invitation to "come and check out" what Jesus is about. Philip doesn't try to argue or coerce. Rather, he invites Nathanael to come and meet the rabbi so that he can come to his own conclusion about who the man really is. Where Nathanael puts a stop sign, Philip sees a green light. Philip knew that his skeptical friend would respond best to an invitation (the same invitation that Jesus had given to Andrew and Peter just a few verses earlier in John's Gospel).

Nathanael accepts the invitation and, to his amazement, discovers that although he doesn't know Jesus, Jesus does in fact know him. Similarly, we are all invited to follow one who already knows everything there is to know about us. When we come to Jesus, and when we invite others to "come and see," we know that he's ready to come and dwell with us with no honking horns necessary. Philip will become a great evangelist, because he sees everyone as simply needing an invitation, and will spend most of his life on the road inviting others to "come and see." One of the key rules of the road for being a disciple is having a desire, and a way for inviting people, to come and meet Jesus. Which begs the question, Who can you invite to "come and see?"

Our third and last rule, is tied to our second rule, in that we are invited to not only come, but if we are willing to open our hearts and our eyes, perhaps we will actually be able to see something. Nathanael was amazed that Jesus knew him, but if that -in and of itself was amazing, Jesus told his new disciple that he hadn't seen anything yet. He declares, "You will see greater things than these." In fact, the rest

of John's gospel reveals the amazing things that Jesus is talking about. Those who accepted Jesus invitation witnessed healings, exorcisms, miracles, the transfiguration and, especially resurrections of the dead. Following Jesus was a ticket to a wild ride with many twists and turns.

Later in John's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that even the miraculous things they witnessed were nothing compared to what they would do when he was gone. "Very truly I tell you," Jesus told his fellow travelers, "the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it." Those who accept the challenge of following Jesus, and his invitation to come and see, have the potential to do the things that Jesus did.

Many Christians, however, are simply content with doing only what *they* think they can do; following the rules that are easiest to obey, and taking only the roads that are clearly marked, safe, and smoothly traveled. The disciples of Jesus learned, however, that following Jesus is actually a journey filled with strange and exciting opportunities to rewrite the rules of the way things currently work in the world. It's an invitation to run off the map, and to flout the self-imposed rules that keep us, and those around us, from experiencing a true, and abundant life. Think about it, we all have to obey the rules, we get behind the wheel of a vehicle and strap ourselves in. Strapping ourselves into a life of discipleship, however, is a much wilder ride with a better destination!