

Rules of the Road

I'm spending a lot of time in the car these days – in the passenger seat. You see, Caroline has her driver's permit. So while I spend a lot of time in the car, it's not actually driving the car. I am instructing Caroline how to drive, and teaching her the Rules of the Road. There's a lot of focus on what you need to do behind the wheel, what you can't (or shouldn't) do, to successfully navigate from point A to point B as you drive. And amazingly, this is all related to our worship today!

Today is a day of celebration – it is Pentecost Sunday. But it's also Confirmation Sunday and a Communion Sunday, and then later this afternoon, we Install Kirby as our pastor here at APC. As I was preparing for worship today, and reading the lectionary passages and thinking about all that is taking place today, I was very surprised to discover some helpful similarities between learning to drive and the enduring messages of Pentecost, Confirmation, Communion and even Installation!

But first, let's focus on Pentecost. Today, Christians all around the world are celebrating Pentecost. The word "Pentecost" actually means fifty and it is the second of the three major Jewish festivals - also known as the Feast of Weeks. Pentecost occurs fifty days after Passover, and marked the time of the wheat harvest, when people would give the first fruits of their labor to God in thanksgiving for God's goodness.

In the days of Jesus, lots of people would have come into town, into Jerusalem, for this harvest festival. There would have been crowds - people from all over the surrounding countryside. There would have been an excitement in the air - the mood of a festival. And so with the disciples all gathered together, fifty days after they had found the stone rolled away and the tomb of Jesus empty, after they had talked and eaten with the risen Christ, and after they had seen Jesus ascend up into the heavens out of their sight, fifty long days later, the Spirit of God comes down among the disciples.

I suspect that the disciples were a bit distressed when they saw Jesus ascend up into the heavens. They were probably a bit confused about what to do next, how to go on without Jesus to instruct and guide them. Some may have begun to lose their faith and others may have quarreled over who was in charge or how decisions were to be made. And so, just as they had watched Jesus - God's son and presence with them on earth - ascend into

the clouds, they now watch as a rush of wind fills the house, and flames appear among them, all somehow seeming to come from heaven. God's Spirit - God's presence with them now that Jesus can no longer be with them - has come down from heaven to fill them with the grace of God. They no longer need to be confused. They no longer need to feel alone. They can be confident in God's presence with them in all that they do.

This is what we celebrate today - on Pentecost. We remember the gift of the Holy Spirit given to the disciples 2,000 years ago, and we give thanks for the presence of the Holy Spirit in our own lives.

It must have been rather amazing to be there that day. People all hearing words spoken in their own native language. We might think it was the only way for the whole group gathered to understand whatever it was that the disciples were saying. But that's not the case. In fact, everyone who was there that day would have understood either Greek or Aramaic. Those were the common languages of the day. So why have all these different people hear in their native language? It was to prove a point. It was to get people's attention. To say, God's power can overcome all barriers between people, and it can work through all of you. Everyone there. And it got people's attention. But more importantly, it was God's way of showing the reconciling power of the Holy Spirit. Just as all these people can be united through this miracle of languages, so too are they united in their faith in the risen Christ. There is no longer any need for division - in Christ Jesus we are all one.

Today we celebrate that which binds us together as a Christian church - our faith in a loving God, our belief in the risen Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is a day for looking back at our history and where we've come from. But it's also a day to look ahead, at where we're headed. And this brings us back to the connection with driving. Listen to these Rules of the Road:

1. Always be alert and aware
2. Things you don't expect will happen
3. Pay attention to what's behind you as well as what's ahead of you

These are great Rules of the Road ... but they are every bit as relevant to our understanding of Pentecost and the gift of the Holy Spirit - as well as to our understanding of the celebration of the Lord's Supper, to our youth Confirming their baptismal vows, and to the Installation of Kirby as our pastor. Listen again:

1. Always be alert and aware
2. Things you don't expect will happen
3. Pay attention to what's behind you as well as what's ahead of you

Today is a day of celebration and these Rules of the Road can help guide our way.

I want to close today with an illustration for our Confirmation Class. When you learn to drive, and finally take the driver's test and get your Driver's License, you don't STOP driving. You keep driving. You drive more and better and farther. You have spent this year learning about the Christian faith. We have watched videos, played games, done mission projects, written faith statements, had discussions and eaten donuts. But when you take your vows of membership this morning, and get your cross and certificate, that doesn't mean you are all DONE learning, or should stop coming to church, or that your faith will stop growing. I hope you will think of your Confirmation as a "license to drive".

Our celebrations this day are both touch points to the past and starting points for the future. May the Rules of the Road guide us as we continue on our journey as Christ's followers.

Amen.