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Car Talk Series #3: *Sharing the Road*
Psalm 8 and Eph. 4:25-5:2
July 30, 2017

Have you ever been driving down the road, happily zipping along to your destination in a timely manner, when all of a sudden, traffic slows down, and gets slower, and slower, and slower, and a line of cars and trucks stretches in front of you just inching along, bit by bit. After a while, the traffic slowly begins to flow a little faster. And as you slowly begin to accelerate again, you look over to the side of the road and see one little car, with a police car behind it, and an officer talking to the driver of that little car. Because one little car was probably driving way too fast, lots of other cars had to slow way, way down.

Has this ever happened to you? You're going to Stormont Vail to visit a loved one who's in the hospital. You go to the parking garage to park your car. And you drive around and around that parking garage, looking for a spot. You can't even count how many spots you pass that say, "Compact car only," that have a gargantuan SUV or a bloated pick-up truck in that spot. And as if that's not bad enough, said driver of that gargantuan SUV or bloated pick-up truck has parked in such a way that there is no way anyone can park in the empty spot next to them, because their vehicle is just a bit over the line, and the vehicle on the other side of that empty spot is also a gargantuan SUV or bloated pick-up truck that is also a bit over the line.

I mentioned this to Lori Hennessey, our administrative assistant here at church. Lori's daughter, Katie, was at Stormont Vail all week, and Lori's eyes got big and she nodded in agreement, describing how frustrating it was to pass all those useless empty spots and have to park all the way up at the far end of the top of the parking garage. I wonder how those drivers who parked in such a thoughtless fashion would react if they knew the inconvenience they

caused for exhausted parents like Lori and Steve, who were busting their behinds to make sure their special-needs daughter always had a parent at her side, while still keeping up with their work and their farm.

And I wonder how that truck driver is doing, the one who was driving his semi-tractor-trailer too fast on I70 West just outside of Kansas City on Tuesday, July 11. He didn't slow down in a construction zone, as he should have, and ended up causing that horrible crash that killed five people, including a beloved retired Washburn professor and his wife.

One driver. One truck. Five lives lost, who knows how many grieving loved ones. A major interstate closed for rest of the day, with thousands of drivers forced to take another way. An investigation that will go on for months. Can you imagine what that truck driver must be thinking and feeling today . . . ?

Today is part 3 of our 4-part "Car Talk" sermon series. We've talked about gratitude as the spiritual equivalent of changing the oil in a car—so important, yet so often neglected. We've talked about rust, and what rust can teach us about appreciating the amazing gifts—and limits—of the human body. Today, our talk turns to what happens when we actually get behind the wheel . . .

Car commercials often show a sleek, gleaming car, gliding along all alone in the mountains, or the desert, or next to the ocean (as if any road along the ocean would ever be that deserted). Reality is: we do not drive in isolation. Other people are on the road. And roads connect to other roads, which connect to other roads, and so on and so forth. What happens to one car on one road can affect many other cars for miles around.

It's a helpful image to bear in mind as we listen for what God may want to teach us in our scripture readings for today. Psalm 8, which Pat read, is a song in praise of the majesty of God.

It also mentions how this same wonderful God has crowned us human beings with glory and honor. The way we live and treat each other either reveals this glory and honor God has given us, or clouds and obscures it. What an awesome privilege—what an awesome responsibility.

But the rubber really meets the road in the letter to the Ephesians, where the author calls us to speak the truth to our neighbors, reminding us that “**we are MEMBERS of one another.**” We’re connected, like our highway system connects Kansas with Los Angeles and Milwaukee and Nashville. This connection means that what we say and do is never neutral. It’s either helping, like people who drive carefully and defensively, or it’s hurting, like people who drive while distracted.

I think we do understand that small things have the power to make a difference. If we didn’t, then the massive recycling bins at the North Dillons wouldn’t always be overflowing every time I go to drop off my plastic bottles and cardboard boxes.

But the author’s main concern in this particular passage seems to be our words.

(I feel like every third or fourth sermon I do has something to do with words, but then again, scripture has a lot to say about words. In fact, one of these days I probably need to do a sermon series that IS all about the power of words, but for today, I think two points are especially important (You’ve heard of three point sermons, this is just two points):

First, words spread. They go and go and go, like the ripples of a big rock thrown into a lake. I don’t mean just the unfortunate things people email to one another and post on social media, which never ever, ever disappear, but words we say face to face, too. Earlier this week, Rachel and I had appointments at the eye doctor. We got there and I went to check us in, and there was a very young woman at the computer, who did not look up, and did not greet me as I stood there at the counter. Without lifting her eyes from her screen, she said, “Can I help you?”

Still without making eye contact, she proceeded to tell me some information about my insurance which I knew to be incorrect. I spoke quietly in what I thought was an assertive way, but I was affronted, and I guess it showed, because when I sat down to wait, Rachel immediately said, “Mom, you sounded snarky.” And then glancing up, I saw the young woman finally looking at me, and then covering her mouth and whispering extensively to a co-worker.

I had blown it on all fronts—instead of feeling compassion for this young woman and her lack of customer service skills, I made sure she knew I was annoyed. My daughter saw her mother speaking in an ungracious tone of voice to a customer service person. All the staff were now eyeing me with that wary look that people reserve for difficult people. And then, when it was time to go back for my eye examination, I had to answer the question, “Do you still work at First Presbyterian Church? What do you do there?” One thoughtless interaction led to moment after moment of regret. And the irony is, I, too, have been a young woman—and a middle-aged woman—who needed to learn better customer service skills.

This story also illustrates the second point, which is that just as the way we drive in a stressful situation says a lot about the kind of person we are, so our words are a witness. My words at the front desk of the eye doctor, or at least the tone of voice in which they were spoken, were not a good witness. But they could have been. Every interaction we have with another human being is a chance to build someone up. Every conversation is a chance to give grace to those who hear, and to those who overhear. It’s a chance for people who follow Christ to start polishing up the badly tarnished image that churches have in much of the world these days. People may not know the stories of the Bible very well anymore, but they do know that Christians are supposed to imitate Christ, and they know that Christ was the guy who said, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged.”

Where do you go today to hear gracious words? Who builds you up? If church isn't one of those places, we've got some serious work to do. There's not a single person in this room who doesn't need some building up from time to time. And there's not a single person in this room who does not have the gifts to build up someone else (Lori's daughter, Katie . . .). If nothing else, we the church should be experts at building people up—and not just each other, but the person with the gargantuan SUV who effectively hogged two parking spots, and front desk people who haven't learned the finer points of customer service, and even the person who wasn't paying attention and caused a deadly traffic accident that will haunt him the rest of his life.

The person who devotes his life to building others up, including people who have hurt him and people with whom he disagrees, will leave a legacy as lasting and powerful as if he had been a great world leader. A church that really takes seriously the instruction to build each other up, to be kind to one another, tenderhearted, and forgiving one another, as Christ forgives us? A church whose members never give up on practicing this can change a whole city. Maybe even the world—it's happened before.

So each week in this Car Talk series I've ended with a challenge. We can call it an invitation, if "challenge" sounds too scary. I invite you to pick a different person every day this week and use your words to build that person up. You could write them a note of encouragement . . . send them an email thanking them for a positive difference they have made in your life. You can call them on the phone and share something you appreciate about them. You can offer a sincere, heartfelt compliment. Whatever fits for you. But make it a different person each day, and here's the catch: if possible, if you're not brand new here, make sure at least two of these people are people from this church who are not family members. You can build up a family member on another day, but at least two days, try building up someone from church that

you are not related to AND it can't be the pastor, either. Helpful hint: a caring card that you drop in the offering plate or leave at the office today can count as one of your days. I'm not going to ask you for a show of hands, but I do encourage each and every one of us to say yes to this challenge. I'll do this, too, and I'll share my efforts on the church facebook page and my own facebook page every day. And I'd love to hear how building others up affects YOU by the end of the week. I think we will make some amazing discoveries together. Amen, and Amen, and Amen.