

## Watch the signs

One of the important lessons all new drivers must learn is the need to pay attention to the signs that they will encounter. Not only the traffic signs and signals outside the car, on the streets and intersections, but also those signs that come up right in front of you. When I was sixteen, I had just received my driver's license, and my sister and her husband, Brad, loaned me one of their cars to use for a few months. It was a little orange Honda Civic, a 1975, I think. I used the car to go back and forth to school and to drive around in the evenings and on weekends. One day, I was talking to Brad, and he asked how everything was going with the car. "Great," I said, "it's such a fun car to drive. I did notice one of the lights came on in the instrument panel." Brad, who was always easy-going, became suddenly serious. "Which light?" he asked.

"It was by the speedometer," I said.

"Which light," he repeated.

"Well, it might be the oil light - it had a little oil can thing."

Brad's demeanor became rather intense. "Were there any other lights? How did the engine sound? Did the light stay on? When did this happen?"

"I think it came on yesterday, maybe the day before." I replied. "But everything's fine; the car's been running great."

Despite my efforts to remain calm about this, Brad was now distressed – both at how this could happen to his car, and how I could disregard such an important warning. I thought it was only this little red light coming on; it really didn't seem like such a big deal. Surely one light didn't mean there were problems with the whole car. Brad made it very clear that it *was* a big deal, and that ignoring it could damage the whole engine. After giving me a brief, but serious, lecture, Brad and I went out to

the car to check it out. Fortunately, the oil level was low, but not dangerously low, and thank heavens, I had done no damage to his beloved Honda. We immediately made a trip to the store to buy the right kind of oil, and Brad showed me where and how to add it to the engine. I learned a sobering lesson: Pay attention to the signs, even if they are small, like a tiny red oil can on the instrument panel.

Throughout the scriptures, God gives us signs telling us to pay attention. The Lord told the prophet Ezekiel, "You, O mortal, I have made to a sentinel, a guard, to keep watch over the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall pronounce as a warning from them to me." The prophets often use the phrase, "Thus says the Lord." That is for the people a kind of flashing warning light, a sign that they have turned from the ways of God. "Hear the words of the Lord," declare the prophets. There are important matters that you have ignored or neglected. You have forgotten the ways of justice and peace. You have neglected the poor and the outcasts. This will lead to your destruction."

The prophets give warning signs to the people of Israel, acting like the brake light in your car. And when we notice it, when we see and hear the message from God, then we can admit our wrong-doing, and repent and with God's help, live in a new way. The prophet's words are stern, but they also give the assurance of God's love and forgiveness, and so their words also bring hope. God has no pleasure in the death of wicked," states Ezekiel, "but that that they turn from their ways and live." Brad would have taken no pleasure in the destruction of his Honda, rather, by teaching me the importance of my negligence, I could learn something. I could pay attention and keep guard, like a sentinel so that little orange car could live.

Signs from God are given so that we may live in better relationship with God and with one another. The two are always intertwined. To be faithful in one is to be

faithful in the other. That is why the prophets call us back to God and at the same time remind us to care for the widows and orphans, to help the poor, the suffering, and the outcast. Jesus summed it up like this: the first and great commandment is to love your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, and the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself. On these two, closely bound commandments, hang all the law and the prophets. We are called to serve God, and follow Jesus as our Lord, and as part of that, we promise to work for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

In the letter to the Roman, Paul states it this way: “Love is the fulfilling of the law,” Paul writes. And like the prophets, Paul brings it down to a simple, urgent message of repentance. “You know what time it is; it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.” You are no longer children who don’t know any better. You are no longer a foolish, beginning driver who doesn’t know what an oil light indicates. You are wiser and experienced in the faith. So, live like it. Repent where you need to. Lay aside the works of darkness and follow the way of love – toward God and your neighbor. Lay aside the works of darkness, and put on the new life, this armor and light of Christ.

Conflict has been given a bad name. We often regard it as if it were something we need to avoid. But conflict is going to happen – at your work, or school, in your family, even the church. We imperfect humans do not always live in harmony with our neighbors and with God. Conflict and tension – those things are not bad in themselves. They are often a warning light pointing out that something is not right. When conflict arises, what matters is how we pay attention, and how we respond. We could ignore the problem, of course. That’s usually the easiest thing to do. We could hope it just goes away. We could tell ourselves that avoiding it won’t cause any damage or do any harm on our journey. But that would be a mistake.

Jesus, who lived the way of love, offers some very practical wisdom on how to live in right relationship with each other. Jesus does not tell us to avoid conflict, especially in the church. He doesn't say that if there is conflict in your particular parish, that is so terrible you had best go find another congregation that is conflict-free. Jesus instead gives good advice for when it happens, because it *is* going to happen. He teaches, "If another member of the church, if a brother or sister in Christ, sins against you, whether it's your fault or not, you are to go person, alone, and talk it out."

If you have a problem with a person in the church, if someone has offended you, don't ignore it. Go to that person. If you don't like my sermon, or something I am doing, come talk to me. If you have a problem with what another member of the church has said or done, go talk to that person. Good heavens, we in the church struggle to learn this lesson and yet Jesus' teaching on it was so clear. And if there is listening, then you have regained that friendship, maybe even strengthened it. Notice, Jesus doesn't say when the two of you agree, he merely says when there is listening, that is enough.

If that listening doesn't happen, then bring in one or two others, not to outnumber the person, but in order to help, to listen, to work for reconciliation. If that process brings about resolution, then wonderful. If not, then bring in the resources of the whole community, so that the people of God can all work to restore God's presence and healing to the hurt that has taken place. Finally, if that does not work, then let it go. Let them be, Jesus says, as a Gentile or tax collector. By the way, it is good to remember that Jesus never gave up on Gentiles or tax collectors. Let there be peace about it. After you have done your part, with God's help, and the church's help, then you can leave the rest in God's hands.

Why would Jesus be so concerned with what appears to be ordinary conflict resolution? It is because our relationships with each other are that important. It is because the work of reconciliation and healing is vital to who we are. Love God, love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus came to reconcile all of us to God. We are called to do the same. The Catechism in our Book of Common Prayer teaches that the mission of the church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. Everyone who follows Jesus is to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world.

This very day there just may be some little light is flashing on your life's dashboard. Maybe your relationship with God hasn't been so good lately. Maybe, if you are honest with yourself, you really aren't praying or living the way the Spirit has been prompting you. Maybe you have been so wrapped up in yourself you haven't been reaching out to serve and help others. Perhaps you have ignored some warning signs for a while, and you are feeling somewhat empty and aching inside. Is there a relationship in your family, or here in the church that needs Christ's healing presence. Don't ignore the words you are hearing, or the signals you are seeing.

And do not fear. God desires that we have forgiveness and healing and new life. Now is the time to listen and see the signs that God is giving us. Now is the time to turn to God and find new life. Amen.

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Trace Browning

Proper 18, 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

Ezekiel 33:7-11 • Psalm 119:33-40 • Romans 13:8-14 • Matthew 18:15-20

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