

July 15

Artisans of the Common Good

Galatians 6:7-10

Some time ago someone gave me an article by David Brooks, a syndicated columnist for the New York Times, titled, "How Would Jesus Drive?" The idea for this piece came from Pope Francis' New Year's homily where he states that the people who have the most influence on society are actually the normal folks, through their normal, everyday gestures: being kind in public places, attentive to the elderly. The pope called such people, in a beautiful phrase, "the artisans of the common good." The pope focused especially on driving, praising those people "who move in traffic with good sense and prudence."

As Richard Reeves of the Brookings Institution points out, driving is precisely the sort of everyday activity through which people mold the culture of their community. If you speed up so I can't merge into your lane, you're teaching me that the society around here is basically competitive, not cooperative. If, on the other hand, you give me a friendly wave after I let you in, you're teaching me that this is a place where a kindness is recognized and gratitude is expressed. If you get over to the right and wait your turn in a crowded highway exit lane, rather than cutting in at the last moment, that teaches me that there's a sense of fairness and equality, and that people feel embedded in the group.

Driving is governed by law, but it's also shaped by norms. If enough people adopt the same driving style, then that behavior hardens into a communal disposition. Once people understand what is normal around here, more people tend to drive that way, too, and you get this amplified, snowball effect. Kindness breeds kindness. Aggression breeds aggression. This is essentially what the Apostle Paul was saying to the people in Galatia.

We all know that driving cultures vary widely from city to city. Studies have been done, of course. According to Allstate, the most accident-prone drivers live in Boston; Baltimore; Worcester, Massachusetts; Washington, D.C.; and Springfield,

Massachusetts. The safest drivers live in Kansas City, Kansas; Brownsville, Texas; Madison, Wisconsin; and Huntsville, Alabama.

A company called Automatic makes a device that measures how cars race through traffic. It finds that drivers in Phoenix; Tucson, Arizona; and Memphis, Tennessee, are the most aggressive and those in Honolulu; Portland, Oregon; and Seattle the most courteous.

Driving means making a thousand small moral decisions: whether to tailgate to push the slowpoke faster, or to give space; whether to honk only as a warning or constantly as your all-purpose show of contempt for humanity. Driving puts you in a constant position of asking, "Are we in a place where there is a system of self-restraint, or are we in a place where it's dog eat dog?" Driving puts you in a constant position of asking, "Are my needs more important than everybody else's, or are we all equal?" Driving also puts you in a position where you are periodically having to overrule your desire for revenge. When somebody cuts you off, you want to punish the jerk and enforce all that is right and good. But that only leads to a cycle of even worse driving, so it's better, as Pope Francis would say, to turn the other cheek. In short, driving puts you into social situations in which you have to co-construct a shared culture of civility, and go against your own primeval selfishness, and it does so while you are encased in what is potentially a 4,000-pound metal weapon.

All of this brought him to the question: "How would Jesus drive?" He didn't answer the question but that is what I want us to focus on. We are called to be disciples, followers of Jesus. Like driving, faith means making a thousand small moral decision. So the answer to this question of how would Jesus drive is also a call to us in how to respond to life. As Pope Francis said, we are to be artisans for the common good.

We would assume that Jesus would be one of the courteous drives. At a four way stop he would let the others go first even if it was his turn. He would not tailgate or lay on his horn to express his opinions about your driving. He would see

us on the journey together and your needs would matter to him. I picture this scenario. Jesus is on Highway 101 and comes up behind a slow driver. Instead of getting up on his bumper and weaving out into the other lane at every chance, trying to get around them while angrily gritting his teeth at this slow poke, I would see him slow down, offer a prayer for the other realizing that if they are going slow it must mean that they either are uncomfortable driving at highway speeds for whatever reason or they are new to the area. He would enjoy the views knowing that some passing lanes are coming in the not too distant future. And when he passes he would turn and give the person a smile.

If, instead of driving we are talking about life, think about the thousands of choices we have to be kind and courteous towards others? As Paul says, we are never to tire of doing good. And if enough of us create a culture of civility and kindness it literally changes the community we live in. And if not that, we at least would like everyone to know that those who worship at Trinity are striving to be courteous and agents for the common good.

I also do not see Jesus as being an aggressive driver, prone to road rage, and trying to get revenge. We have all experienced the aggressive driver. They ride our bumper, they honk the horn, cut us off in the parking lot, and more. It is stressful to drive around them. As the report shows different cities have created different cultures when it comes to driving. I have to, on occasion, drive in the Washington DC and Baltimore area when I am visiting our son. It is incredibly stressful to drive the freeways right in the core urban area. They have a culture of aggression. Everyone drives ten or more miles above the speed zone, right on the bumper of the other, changing lanes if there is so much as a little opening and riding the brakes. I drive it but I get in the far right lane, don't change out of it unless I absolutely have to and watch people speed around me and ignore their glares and honks because I am not driving the way they think I should. I always breath a sigh of relief when I get a ways out of the urban core and traffic thins out and it becomes more civilized. Even though Seattle has a lot of traffic problems, we are polite about

it! Jesus would be more of a Seattle driver than a Baltimore driver, and don't get me started about those from northern New Jersey!

In faith we are called to make decisions, thousands of them, about how we react to others. Are we going to be aggressive, getting in their faces, demanding it be done our way? Are we going to be angry, spiteful and filled with needs for revenge? If so, we are not following Christ. We are called to be artisans for the common good, sharing love and compassion.

We are called to be co-constructors of a shared culture of civility in driving and in all of life. We are to be artisans for the good. We should not grow tired of doing good. It isn't spectacular doing this. We are not going to get recognized for being kind, letting others go first and not getting angry. But when we all try to make all those little decisions to do the right thing, to follow Jesus' example, we create a better place. This is not a wishful thinking thing. Paul says we harvest what we plant. Those who plant for the benefit of the Spirit will harvest eternal life. Whenever we have an opportunity, we are to try and make the choices that share our love of Christ.

David Brooks ends his article this way: "I'm going to try to remember one lesson when I hit the road: Though I may be surrounded by idiots, I'm potentially an artisan of the common good." We need to remember this as well. And the road for us begins right outside the sanctuary door. We can change the culture of our world!