Sunday, April 11, 1999
RULES OF THE ROAD FOR LIFE'S JOURNEY
Matthew 7:12-14, 22:35-40

Today, in the 10:30 a.m. worship service, 48 young people will be received into membership in this congregation through the rite of Confirmation. Since last September, these young people have participated in weekly class sessions and discussions led by a team of dedicated teachers and coordinated by our director of youth, Rita Christensen.

I have also had the privilege of meeting with each young person individually by appointment in my office during the past month. In preparation for these "one-on-one" meetings, each class member was asked to write a paper about their Confirmation experience.

Also, during these past eight months, each young person has been expected to attend worship services regularly, to listen closely to the sermons, and then write summaries of some of the sermons. In addition, each class member is expected to be a regular financial contributor to the church along with their parents.

Because these 48 young people are being received into membership this morning and are thereby confirming their baptismal vows, the sermon has the title, "Rules of the Road for Life's Journey." These "Rules of the Road," which come directly from the life and teachings of Jesus and have their roots in the Old Testament, are not only for the young people who are being confirmed but for all of us who claim to be Christians as we seek to know and follow the will of God as revealed by Jesus.

Sometimes life is compared to a game. I have a little book recently published titled If Life Is a Game, These Are the Rules. Life as a game can be a useful metaphor, but I prefer to think of life as a journey. The fact is that the emphasis both in Jesus' teaching and in the Gospels themselves is upon a "way" or "path," which implies that life is a journey. Jesus teaches a "way." Before the early followers of Jesus were called "Christians," they were known as "followers of the way."

Each individual begins his or her life's journey at birth. Along the way, we have many choices to make — there are always forks in the road. We have to decide time and time again whether or not to follow the "way" of Jesus or to follow another way. Along the journey, there are starts and stops, detours, holding patterns, accidents. Sometimes we lose our way because we refuse to obey the rules of the road, look at a map, or stop and ask for directions. If we try to take too many shortcuts or travel too fast, that can cause problems on the journey. Knowing when to stop and rest and when to start again is crucial. Along the way, we need to make periodic "destination checks" to be sure we are heading for the destination we had in mind.

The rules of the road for our life's journey, which come from our Christian faith, are based on the following principles found in the Bible.

First, each one of us is created in the image of God. The implications of this principle are astounding. For example, whenever you meet another human being, no matter how different that person may appear to you or how depraved you think that person is — remember, that person was created in God's image and therefore has worth.

Second, God has so made the world and each one of us that, with God's help, human progress is possible. Life need not be an endless cycle of birth and death. Because we human beings are created in the image of God, we are co-creators with God, and therefore it is possible — assuming we make the right choices — for tomorrow to be better than today. The future is open.

This means that in each moment, in each choice you make, you are choosing to align yourself with God's rules of the road for your life's journey or choosing to veer away from them. There are no neutral actions.

Third, God's creation operates on certain basic laws, and we're only effective in fulfilling God's purpose for us to the degree that we discover and live in harmony with these laws. Knowing this can teach us humility. To fully discover and live according to these laws, we need to cultivate habits of continual learning. When a continual learner fails or makes a mistake or hits a law head-on, he or she asks, "What can I learn from this?"

One of the best examples of these "laws" built into creation is what Stephen Covey calls the "Law of the Farm."

Did you ever cram in school — goof off during the semester, then spend all night before the big test trying to cram a semester's worth of learning into your head?

Can you imagine "cramming on the farm"? You're too busy or too lazy to properly prepare the soil and plant in the spring. You goof off during the summer, but then you try to make up for it in the fall, ripping up the soil, throwing in the seed, watering, cultivating, and expecting to get a bountiful harvest almost overnight. It won't work.

In the long run, the "Law of the Farm" governs all areas of life. How many of us wish now we hadn't crammed in school? We got the degree, but didn't get the education.

What about character? Can you cram and suddenly become a person of integrity, courage, or compassion? Or physical health? Can you overcome years of potato-chip, chocolate-cake, no-exercise, smoking, and other bad habits by spending the night before the marathon working out at the health club?

What about marriage? What about relationships with children? What about relationships with others? What about our relationship with God? Can these be crammed? Or does the "Law of the Farm" apply? You can be sure it does.

These then are some of the principles upon which the rules for the road for life's journey are based:

- We are all created in the image of God.
- If we follow the will of God, progress is possible. It depends on our choices.
- We need to be continually learning the basic laws that govern life. The Law of the Farm is only one example.

Now let's look more specifically at some of the rules for the road for our life's journey, which are based on these principles and also come from the life and teachings of Jesus.

First, (and these are all equally important), Jesus said there is one great commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This grows directly out of the principle that each one of us is created in God’s image. When you abuse another person in any way or use another person or let another person use you, you are treating that other person as less than holy, and you are abusing God’s image. The Bible says in another place, “Anyone who says he or she loves God and hates another person is a liar.”

If you follow this rule of the road of loving God and neighbor, then your life’s journey will keep on track. The purpose of the church is to increase among people the love of God and neighbor.

Second, the rule of the road for your life’s journey is connected to and grows out of the first. It is often called the “Golden Rule.” Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”

This is another way of saying, as I have said in previous sermons, live from the inside out. If you are living from the outside in, then you will be reacting to people and treating them as they treat you. If someone is mean to you, you are mean in return. If someone is impolite to you, you are rude to them. You are letting them control how you act. It’s a reversal of the “Golden Rule": you are doing to others what they are doing to you, rather than the other way around. You are only a responder. You are living from the outside in. When you live from the inside out, as did Jesus, then you act instead of react.

Third, the rule of the road for life’s journey, if you are going to follow the way of Jesus, is to be a giving person.

Jesus taught that you will only find your life by losing it, by giving it away, by letting your life be one of service to others.

How do you become a giving person? By doing it rather than only thinking about it. It’s what I call the power of positive acting. It is easier to act yourself into a new way of thinking than to think yourself into a new way of acting.

To follow this rule of the road for life’s journey is not easy. It goes against much of what present-day secular culture teaches and would have us do. This message we hear from the culture every day is that you will find meaning and happiness in life by making more money so that you can buy and consume more for yourself. The world is already filled with enough stingy, hoarding people.

To repeat: there are three fundamental rules of the road for your life’s journey if you are going to follow the will of God as taught and lived by Jesus.

- Obey the great commandment: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.
- Live according to the “Golden Rule”: do unto others as you would have them do unto you — in other words, live from the inside out.
- Be a giving person who serves God by serving others. The only way to become a giving person is to begin doing it, with money and with deeds of service. Your thinking will follow your actions.

Why are these “rules of the road” so important? Because they are based on principles built into creation by God. When you follow them, you are fulfilling God’s purpose for your life.

Most of the young people being confirmed this morning are 14, or 15, or 16. Many of them have their “driver’s permit,” or will soon be getting it, and then their “driver’s license.” To get a permit or driver’s license, one has to learn the rules of the road for driving. Knowing and following them makes traveling by automobile safer for all of us. Without these rules and people following them, life would be chaotic and extremely dangerous.

The same is true for the rules of the road for your life’s journey. Knowing them and following them makes life better for you and for all of us. Amen.