Sunday, April 21, 2002
DRIVER'S TEST
Matthew 7:12-14, 22:35-40

The Rite of Confirmation for young people in many branches of the Christian Church is a kind of "coming of age" ceremony. It marks one of the transitions on the road from childhood to becoming an adult. If you were baptized as an infant, your parents made serious commitments on your behalf. According to the liturgy we use, they promised, with God's help and by their own example and with the help of the church, to lead their child toward an understanding of the Christian faith and to becoming a follower of Jesus Christ.

In the Rite of Confirmation, you "confirm" these promises made on your behalf. You make them your own. In a church ceremony, you announce publicly that you intend to follow the Christian way, to become a "follower of the way." It's an ancient Christian tradition and a very important one. In our culture, it's one of several kinds of "coming of age" indicators.

A very important secular "coming of age" event in the lives of young people today is taking their driver's test, receiving their learner's permit, and then a driver's license. When you accept the permit and later the license, you are stating that you are willing to abide by the rules and laws that govern driving a car and that you will act as a responsible, trustworthy driver. Before you took your driver's test and got your permit and license, you were dependent on others driving you where you wanted or needed to go. Now you can drive yourself. That means added responsibility. If you act irresponsibly, you can have your driver's license suspended or revoked.

Both Confirmation and getting your driver's license signify taking more personal responsibility for your life and for the continued direction and purpose of your life's journey. As I mentioned in last Sunday's sermon, the most revealing metaphor for describing your life on this earth is to think of it as a journey. Getting a driver's license makes it possible for you to drive on physical journeys. Once you are confirmed, you are considered an adult member of this congregation, and your continuing spiritual journey implies fulfilling certain responsibilities on your part.

The church does not give you a specific confirmation driver's test to determine whether or not you are ready for your new responsibilities on your life's journey. There is no way to accurately do this. Although in years past, and even today in some churches, confirmation students are subject to a series of questions in the presence of the congregation to determine whether or not they have sufficient knowledge of the faith. When I was being confirmed, that was part of the tradition in the congregation in which I grew up. It was a rigorous test: "Recite the 10 commandments." "Recite, in order, the books of the Bible." And then a whole series of questions and answers from the catechism.

What you have to remember is that you can have extensive knowledge of the Christian faith and still not live the Christian way. You can have all the right beliefs and not act on them. You can have an abundance of knowledge as a driver of a car, know all the laws and rules, and still be a reckless driver.

When I applied for my first driver's license at age 16, there was no written driver's examination, no hands-on driving test, and no eye test to determine whether my eyesight was adequate. I had to answer only two questions: the first one was, "Are you 16?" The second one, "Do you

know how to drive a car?" Since I could answer "yes" to both questions, I received my license in about five minutes.

Like most 16-year-olds, I thought I was a pretty good driver. After all, I had been driving the tractor on the farm since age 12, and the truck in the hayfields and on country roads since age 14. But that still did not prepare me for driving on a super-highway at speeds of 70 miles per hour. It also did not prepare me for making quick decisions in difficult situations. It did not prepare me for driving on roads covered with snow or ice. You can only learn those things by experiencing them.

Furthermore, there is no driver's test that can determine whether you have the good sense to make responsible decisions in unusual circumstances. There is no driver's test that can reveal whether you will be a reckless driver or a careful one. The fact is that each time you get behind the wheel of a car and you are the driver, you are taking the driver's test over again — and now it's a real test. If you fail, you could die or cause death to others. It's helpful to remember that there are certain guidelines or principles you can follow which will aid you in being a careful and safe driver and will minimize your chances of having an accident.

Here are several examples: Always allow enough space between you and the vehicle ahead of you so that if the vehicle in front of you has to stop suddenly, you will not crash into it. Always wear your seatbelt. Do not exceed the speed limit. Do not drink and drive. Keep your vehicle in good condition so that the brakes and other parts work when needed. When the traffic light is changing, do not speed up and try to make it through.

Of course, you can have a perfect score on your driver's test, be careful and not reckless, obey all the rules I've just mentioned, and still have accidents. I can be walking across the street when the "walk" light says it's safe and still be hit by a careless driver.

Today, in the rite of Confirmation, you are getting your own driver's license for your journey through life. Although you weren't given any kind of formal driver's test in your confirmation class, you were being prepared in other ways to take more and more control of your life on its journey. You will discover as you travel your journey through life that you will be taking a kind of spiritual driver's test over and over again.

There are certain spiritual principles or driver's test questions that the Christian faith offers. If you give the right answers and follow them, they will guide you on your life's journey so that overall, you will live joyfully and abundantly. Remember Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly." This does not guarantee that you will have no accidents, suffering, or tragedy on your life's journey, but that overall, your life will have beauty, joy, and power.

The first of these spiritual principles for your life's journey is: always remember you and each and every human being are created in God's image. 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 or ugly that person might seem to be, remember he or she was created in God's image, just like you. That does not mean that individual, or you for that matter, always lives up to that image. There are people who forget or never knew in the first place that they were created in God's image. And sometimes, even when they know it, they don't act like it.

A second spiritual principle, which is an important guide for your life's journey, grows out of the first. Because you have been created in God's image, and therefore God's Spirit dwells in you, you have the power to act and not react. This is a spiritual principle I've mentioned many times in sermons, but it needs repeating. Here's a story from Sydney Harris that has been of immense help to me over the years.

Harris said, "I walked with my friend, a follower of Jesus, to the newsstand the other night after work, and my friend bought a newspaper from the stand on the corner and thanked the newsman politely. The man who sold him the paper didn't even acknowledge it. 'He's a sullen fellow, isn't he?' said Harris. 'Oh, he's that way every night,' shrugged my friend. 'Then why do you continue being so polite to him?' Harris asked. 'Why not?' said my friend. 'Why should I let him decide how I'm going to act?'"

The key word here is "act." This follower of the way, who remembers that he has been created in God's image, "acts" toward people. Too many of us react. People who act instead of react toward others do so from an inner sense of balance. They refuse to return incivility with incivility because then they would no longer be in control of their own conduct, but would be mere responders to others.

No one is unhappier than the perpetual reactor. Your spiritual temperature is always being raised or lowered by the social climate around you. Then you have forgotten that you are created in God's image. You have turned control of yourself over to others. You let other people determine whether you will be rude or gracious, elated or depressed. The basic cause of what is being called "road rage" in our time is because drivers react instead of act. If you study the life of Jesus as described in the New Testament, you will discover he was one who acted instead of reacted.

A third spiritual principle, which is an important guide for your life's journey, is found in what is commonly called the "great commandment." One day, someone asked Jesus which was the most important commandment of all. His answer was: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." This commandment is directly related to the principle that each human being is created in God's image. When you love another human being, you are in effect loving God because God is in that person. When you love your neighbor as yourself, you are also loving God because God is in you as well as in your neighbor.

When you abuse another person in any way, mistreat someone, or use another person, or let another person use you, you are treating that person as less than someone who has been created in God's image. In the deepest sense, you are being disrespectful of God. The Bible says in another place, "Anyone who says he or she loves God and hates another person is a liar."

The fourth spiritual principle for being sure that you continue to pass the driver's test for your life's spiritual journey is found in what is usually called the "golden rule." It comes straight from the teachings of Jesus. He said in the Sermon on the Mount, "In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you."

There's yet one more spiritual principle for living and traveling on your life's journey. Jesus taught that you will only find your life by losing it, by giving it away, by reaching out to others.

How do you become a giving person? By doing it rather than just thinking about it. This principle of giving goes against much of what our present-day culture teaches and would have you do. The principle we hear from the culture every day is that you find meaning and purpose in life by making more money so that you can buy more and more and consume for yourself. The world is already filled with enough stingy, hoarding people.

To repeat, in order to pass your driver's test on your journey through life, remember and practice these principles, all of which come straight from the life and teachings of Jesus. First, remember that each human being, including you, is created in God's image — therefore, the way you treat people is the way you treat God. Second, become an individual who "acts" rather than "reacts." Third, always follow the great commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." Fourth, practice the golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Fifth, become a giving person in all that you do. And finally, always remember: God is traveling with you. Amen.