

Signs of Life August 24, 2008

When we were trying to come up with a theme for today, Doug Kniptash suggested that we think about all the various road signs we see, and try to figure out how they might help us when it comes to living our lives. Since that time, I've been paying a lot more attention to the signs I pass, and I've determined that he's got a good point. There is a lot of wisdom for life contained in many of our road signs.

Certainly not all signs are helpful. I suppose we can't think about all the signage we see along the streets and by-ways without thinking about the old Burma-Shave signs that were strategically placed a little distance apart, and told a story of sorts as the traveler moved along. On the other side of things, we also see signs warning up of eternal damnation if we don't repent of whatever it is we're doing. I usually speed right on by those.

Some of the signage that's out there is downright funny. There are several humorous videos on YouTube, but unfortunately, there were also some that were lacking in good taste, and we couldn't show them to you, but there were some humorous ones we could share. For example, I saw a picture of this one (on screen—upside down sign reading “If you can read this...you've just had an accident.”)

I saw a sign pointing out road construction that read, “Prepare to be annoyed,” and another construction sign that said “No way you're getting to work on time.” There are also some signs that are pretty confusing, like this one...(on screen—pictures of caution sign with arrows going 5 different directions, and words below saying :”Good luck.”)

It's strange how things strike us as humorous at a time that's not supposed to be humorous. A few years ago, a group of us traveled to a small town in southern Indiana to attend the funeral of a dear friend's father. It was a dark, dreary day, and it had started to spit snow by the time we got to the cemetery. There, as the procession came through the entrance was a big sign reading, “Have a nice day!” with a smiley face on it! It just seemed

wrong, but we laughed a lot then, and still do when we think of it.

If we pay attention, there are all kinds of signs along the highway which give us valuable information and help in making our way to wherever we're going. Our Bible passage from Luke's gospel might be a sort of guideline for us to think about as we consider all the signs that help move us through life. It reads like this: “Put your mind on your life with God. The way to life—to God—is vigorous and requires your total attention.”

I think that Luke is urging us to know that life can and will be difficult; there will be struggles and heartache and constant striving. It requires our being fully invested in living the best way we possibly can. In the writer's mind, that is keeping our lives focused around God and God's loving goodness.

In some ways, I think John M. Henry was saying something similar when he wrote, “Yesterday is experience. Tomorrow is hope. Today is getting from one to the other as best we can.” I believe that, even though life is difficult, we get from one day to the other best when we don't try to go it alone, but instead move with God.

If I were to try to put what Luke is saying in the imagery of today's service, it would be this: Life is like trying to drive down an unknown road that has no road signs of any kind along the way, or that has road signs that we just simply don't see or look for. We have to pay attention to the signs along the way if we're to make it where we want to go. Life just goes better when we pay attention to the signs along the way, and stay connected with God.

So, given all that, what are some of the road signs we encounter that could be considered as signs helping us know more about the life we're living? The list is endless, but I've chosen a few that I find particularly meaningful. Actually, it might be interesting if each of us watched the road signs a little more carefully, and shared our interpretation of how they might be guiding us. At any rate, here are mine.

The first one is more generic than the others, and it's the diamond-shaped caution signs that we see. They say all kinds of things, but sometimes it's simply the word “caution,” meaning there's something ahead that we need to be aware of. A caution sign of life just might be reminding us that this is life, and our mission is to be in it. We need to just

get real when it comes to what life's like and commit to live in it, no matter what it holds.

There are several specific kinds of warnings we find on caution signs. For example, one might indicate to us that there is a **winding road** ahead. I would guess that almost all of us would acknowledge that life is like a winding road much of the time. There are always twists and turns that we hadn't planned on or anticipated. We come upon unexpected curves that slow us down. There are even times that we become over confident and take a curve too quickly. We wind up learning a costly lesson.

I can personally speak to that because just after I got my driver's license, I was driving up one of the hills around Madison to go to my piano lesson. I had driven that hill road several times, and was pretty sure of myself, but I went into one of the turns entirely too fast, and found myself skidding across the downhill lane and off into the gravel alongside the road. It was a long way down on the other side of the guardrail that I was skimming, but fortunately, there was no other car in sight, and I did get the car under control.

But in the process, I learned a valuable lesson. When we're encouraged to slow down at a sharp curve, we probably need to heed the sign and do so. The same is true for the curves that we encounter in life; it helps us negotiate them better if we just slow down and take our time.

Another road sign we often come upon, especially during the summer season, is one telling us of a **detour**, meaning we can't go the best or shortest way, but instead have to go a different way. We encounter detours in life all the time, either out of necessity or happenstance. Sometimes, in order to get to our destination, we have to take another route, another path. We lay our plans, but there are unexpected changes that move us in other directions.

When that happens, our tendency is often to think that we're wasting too much time or energy, but I really don't believe that's so. As I've reflected on my life journey, it seems to me that some of the times that seem like detours have actually provided some valuable experiences that had a shaping influence on what came next. As I've said before, I really don't think there's anything such as a wasted experience. We can learn and grow from every side trip, and all those detours shape who we are.

Another sign that we find along interstates is one that tells us to **"merge."** That tells us that there are others who want to share the road with us, and we need to move over and allow space for them to make their journey. In some ways, this speaks of working together for the smoothest possible ride. There is a spirit of cooperation imbedded in the instructions to merge.

But it seems to me that there's something else there, too. There is a sense of allowing others to move at their own pace, and to let that be OK. I know we don't always feel that way when we're on a two-lane road and someone's driving below the speed limit. I guess I should speak for myself, but I really prefer that folks drive 5 miles or so over the speed limit, and it's hard for me to be patient with those who are going exactly the posted speed. I have to remind myself constantly that it's OK, and I just need to back off and relax about it.

I think this fits into life's schematics when we don't exactly agree with the way someone is living his or her life. Instead of backing off and letting them live as they deem best, we tailgate and push, wanting them to move faster, to decide more quickly, to go the way we want them to go, or believe they should go. In the process, we don't allow people to move attuned to their own rhythm. It might be wise if we remembered to respect others at whatever pace they happen to be moving.

Yet another sign that's one for us to pay attention to is one that tells us an **exit** is coming. There are all kinds of ways we can apply this to life. One would be that there is for all of us a final exit from this earthly life. No one gets out alive, so that's a reminder to live each day to the fullest. You're probably familiar with the Bernard Shaw quote that says: **"Life is not a 'brief candle.' It is a splendid torch that I want to make burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."** We are all carrying a torch of sorts, and we will all be exiting this life at some point, passing that torch on to those who follow us. We want to live the best way we can so the torch burns brightly for others.

There's another way to think about exit signs, too, and that is as a reminder that we need to take breaks in life. We all need downtime, when we get away from the routines of each day, get away from work and its demands, get away from doing the laundry

and dishes and mowing the lawns, and allow our minds, bodies and spirits to be renewed and refreshed. In today's world, I believe we could all benefit by exiting our daily lives, even if only for 5 or 10 minutes at a time, and allow a spirit of renewal to come into our being.

There's another sign that we are seeing a lot this year in the area where I live, and that's the ones that say "Construction zone." We have some major work being done along Keystone Avenue, and some of us encounter it every day as we go to work. The work that's being done is intended to make a much better, more efficient and effective byway on which to travel to and from our desired destinations.

In much the same way, our lives are always in process of being bettered and changed. We are always a work in progress, maybe never ever being completed, but always growing, changing, adapting, reacting to what comes. Each and every moment presents us with the possibility of creating or discovering something new and fresh. In many ways, we are all lifelong construction projects, and that's what makes life exciting as well as challenging.

I would just include one more road sign that can help us as a life sign. It reads: "Do Not Block Intersection." We were downtown recently, completing an assignment to find signs of God. This was one of the sign we found, and the more I think about it, the more I like what it says.

On the most basic level, the sign is telling motorists to be courteous to others and to stay out of an intersection if they're going to be in the way of others who may want to go other directions. To leave openings for others is just common courtesy, and something for all of us to remember.

When it comes to God, I think it's good counsel. Many times we get in the way of those encounters with others, with God. At The Garden we say that our vision is that we will experience God wherever we are, and I'm convinced that God is everywhere, but we sometimes set up blockades, or turn our heads and refuse to see. When we see "Do Not Block Intersection," we are reminded to leave space, leave openings for God's loving goodness to intersect with our lives. When we do that, life will go better.

Well, those are just a few of the life signs I've thought about when looking differently at the signs we see along the

roadways. What ones would you like to think about?

Closing:

Annie Dillard wrote, "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives." I couldn't agree more, and we all need some help along the way. Maybe if we look at those road signs a bit differently, we just might find some hints that guide us in the right direction.

Have a great Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.