

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel for the Twenty Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, November 14, 2010 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

Observe the Speed Laws

A week ago I was involved in the reprise of a play called "I'm Dreaming of a Red Christmas." Some of you saw an original performance given at the Arts Center here in Beaufort two years ago. It came back in Bluffton this year. As a member of the cast, I played the part of a fictitious high Sheriff of Beaufort County, a certain Robert A. Lee or, as he was better known, "Li'l Lee." He was pictured as the creator and primary benefiter of an infamous speed trap that operated on State Highway #46 in Bluffton for years and years. As far as the speed trap is concerned, I don't think that part of the story was fictitious in any way. Lots of people, back when Dale and I told friends as far away as Tennessee and Ohio that we were building our house in Bluffton recognized the exact location because of their memorably negative personal experience of that old speed trap while en route to Hilton Head. That number might, come to think of it, include some of you folks right here with us this morning.

A "speed trap," as we all know (and some of us have personally experienced) is a misapplication of speed laws—an intentionally deceptive change in signage intended to confuse the unwary motorist and then exact a financial penalty in the form of a hefty fine.

What a speed trap does is to take an important and legitimate regulator of traffic flow that promotes everyone's safety and welfare and turns it into a sneaky and cynical source of municipal and personal funding.

What I want to do today is to share with you same thoughts about **legitimate** speed laws and, more particularly, speed laws that relate to our scriptural understanding and living of our Christian vocation. Now you're probably wondering if you heard that right...speed laws in the Bible!?! OK, I can imagine already that, in your minds, most of you are picturing a biblical scene with unpaved roads, a few wagons, and maybe lots of camels. You're questioning how all that might have any possible connection with modern day traffic signs and speed laws.

What makes me focus on speed laws today is the fact that I came across, in my reading this week, a single scriptural verse in which the writer says: "My friends, let every one of you be **swift** to hear, **slow** to speak, and determined to **stop** before losing complete control in anger." That's (at least in one translation) what it says in James 1:19. That verse caught my attention because lately I've been thinking about all the heated rhetoric that accompanied our recent election season and which seems to be carrying over into the weeks following the ballot-counting. There's nothing like politics to get people cross-ways of one another, refusing to listen to each other, and saying hateful things they can't ever take back. But, of course, politics has no monopoly on running the mouth. We all face the challenge of knowing when to speak up and when to keep quiet—especially in the heat of an argument or the stress of family holiday gatherings.

The writer of the Bible verse in the Book of James must have found himself caught up in lots of arguments. He must have heard (and maybe even issued) some pretty hurtful things. He must have discovered that there are probably some helpful rules that might prevent people from turning communication into armed warfare. So he offers some practical observations about how to survive as you travel down the highway of life. Swift, slow, stop: three different speeds that will help you avoid all sorts of crashes and collisions along the way. Let's think about those three different speed laws in the Bible for just a moment.

“Swift” suggests a speed law like the minimum signs that you see along the Interstate—you have to go at least at a certain pace. The writer of this biblical verse says that as far as listening, hearing, paying attention all of us need to be swift—geared up and ready to engage other people as fully as possible—not reluctantly or grudgingly, but with enthusiasm. That’s not an easy law to follow because we don’t always want to hear what others have to say, especially if we don’t agree. We drag our feet and only partially pay attention. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that listening is the first, the primary ministry. It is the most basic service with which we can honor one another. He also goes on to say that we all too often fail in the simple duty of listening. We let things go in one ear and out the other or, perhaps, we only half-listen while absorbing ourselves totally in what we are going to say by way of reply. Real listening requires affirming the worth and value of another human being, putting them ahead of ourselves for the moment. So, the Bible verse tells us that we need to be SWIFT to hear.

The same verse says that we need to be slow to speak. Note well that a “slow” sign is NOT a stop sign. Absolute silence can communicate lack of concern. By being slow to speak I think that what is being asked of us is that we wait until we’ve really heard the other person fully. It suggests that we being speaking only when we’ve taken the time to reflect and are able to give a truly thoughtful response. How easy it is to be hurtful, judgmental, and insensitive. No one is helped by a careless and offhandedly casual response, something that dismisses and devalues the original thought.

How often do we rattle off some top-of-the-head comment that we, later on, regret? Our speaking should always carry a genuine regard, concern, and compassion for others...and that can only happen if we take the time to think about the impact of our words. As the Bible verse puts it, be SLOW to speak.

Finally, we come to the third speed law: stop before losing complete control in anger.

Note that the stop sign here doesn’t preclude speaking up to confront and challenge things that are silly and harmful. Jesus is shown throughout the New Testament as a person who never hesitates to show righteous indignation. He could get angry when people acted hypocritically and he didn’t mind telling them so. What he didn’t do, however, was to lose control. He never went beyond honest feedback to the level of hatred and harm. He always came to a full stop while still in control. Humility and meekness are the brakes that need to be slammed on if there’s any danger that we’re going to bulldoze or steamroll the other person into oblivion. We never ever have the right to give way to our anger if the result is going to be more destructive than instructional. As the Bible verse puts it, STOP before losing complete control in anger.

So there you have some thoughts on what we might call “Christian speed laws.” What they are, I think, is a set of standards by which you can proceed down the road of life safely and confidently. They are guidelines that protect you and others from crashes and collisions. When life calls for listening, be swift to hear. When you are called upon to speak, offer your thoughts carefully and selectively—go slow. When you are so angry as we often say, that you “can’t see straight” that’s a good time to stop and park the car. Just park it and take a break. Remind yourself that, as the author of James 1:19 goes on to tell us in the very next line: the anger of a human being will never promote the justice of God.

Here’s my challenge to all of you and to myself as well. Let’s try during this upcoming season of Advent to observe some time of quiet reflection, some times of silent meditation, some moments of prayerful meditation. My hunch is that there would be a lot fewer relationship fender-benders as we try to negotiate the high traffic areas of holiday busy-ness and stress. Think about it.