

In one of my first sermons from this pulpit as your minister, a sermon I preached almost two years ago to this day, I suggested that being part of the church is a bit like driving a 5-speed car, a bit like driving stick-shift. It's hard to find a 5-speed car anymore; not impossible, just hard. To understand why, all I have to do is think about the years I was in graduate school living in New Jersey. For holidays or on long weekends, I would get in my Volkswagen Jetta, a 5-speed, and drive north along Route 1 until I'd see the on-ramp for the Jersey Turnpike. I'd rev the engine, shift from 3<sup>rd</sup> into 4<sup>th</sup> gear, speed up, my heart would race a little bit, and then I'd hit the brakes, press the clutch, and downshift into 1<sup>st</sup>. And this is how it would go all the way to the Connecticut border. 1<sup>st</sup> gear, 2<sup>nd</sup> gear, 3<sup>rd</sup> gear, back to 1<sup>st</sup> gear, up to 3<sup>rd</sup> gear, back to 2<sup>nd</sup> gear, my left foot becoming one with the clutch. Usually, though, somewhere around Edison, I'd notice that my left hip was suddenly in pain and feeling 40 years older than it actually was. 4 years later when I went to turn in my Jetta, the sales person asked, “Are you looking for a 5-speed or an automatic.” I already knew my answer. “An automatic.”

I'm not a car aficionado. I don't read Consumer Reports. So, maybe it's just my own perception that makes me think there are fewer 5-speed cars out there anymore and that it's because in a world where more people are trying to get to more places in less time, we have become increasingly taken by the idea of something that is automatic, something that will offer us an easier, smoother way.

What I remember about learning to drive a 5-speed, however, is my dad sitting in the passenger seat of our 1988 Mazda SE-5 pick-up truck, trying to describe to me how I

was going to need to push the gas with my right foot while I lifted my left foot off the clutch and listened for the sound of the engine telling me it was time to shift. “Huh?” I remember thinking. “What are you talking about?” The truck would start to roll forward a bit, I’d lift my foot off the clutch too quickly, in a panic I’d slam on the break, and the whole truck would start hemorrhaging. And my dad would say, “Try it again.” So we’d try it again, and again, and again. Then, one day, after my 8<sup>th</sup> failed attempt, my dad had this advice to offer me: “You have to feel the truck.” That sounds like pretty strange advice, especially if you’ve never driven a 5-speed, but if you have driven one, then you know exactly what he’s talking about. It’s not enough just to know what a gas pedal and clutch do. That a clutch, simply put, connects the car engine to the car wheels and that when you push down on the clutch, the engine continues to run while the wheels do not. But lift up on the clutch and now the car is free to move, so long as you give it the gas. The trick of course is to lift up on the clutch and to push down on the gas with equal amounts of pressure. Lift up on the clutch too fast and the engine stalls out. Push down on the gas too much and the engine becomes like a person trying to drink from a firehose. But there is no manual, nor is there any gauge on the dashboard, to tell you how to make that perfect combination of gas and clutch. You just have to feel it.

It’s good advice for when driving a 5-speed. Actually, I’ve come to discover that it’s just good advice. Good advice for the church, good advice for living.

If we presume for a moment that all the church is, is a reflection of our lives and of the story of scripture, then the only way to get anywhere around here is in a 5-speed car. Because neither our lives nor the lives of the people we read about in scripture move at a single speed. I could probably end this sermon right here. That life never moves at just one

speed, and that it often moves either too fast or too slow for our liking, is not news to us. Children often want to be older than they are. Adults want to be younger than they are. Parents look back on 18 years and say, “Where did it go?” Don’t blink, every veteran parent says to every new parent. Even the things that we put off forever, the things that we hope will never come, when we finally see them coming, and we know there’s no way to stop it, we say, “I wish it would just get here so we could be done with it.” I hear this said even about—even about—death.

Abraham and his son Isaac. It’s a story almost everyone knows. One day God speaks to Abraham and tells him, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a sacrifice on a mountain I will show you.” So, the next morning Abraham gets Isaac up early. He saddles the donkey and gives Isaac a bundle of wood to carry and the two set off for the land of Moriah, with only one of them knowing what’s in store. Abraham must have walked very slowly that day. In first gear. First gear is what you use when the way to where you need to go is difficult, when there are rocks to go over and rivers to go through, when you’re not sure you’re going to get there in one piece. You downshift into first gear and power on. In the case of Abraham, he doesn’t even know where he is going. Only that he is being powered by faith in believing that God will show him. As they reach the mountain, Abraham begins to realize that God is not going to turn him back, that he and Isaac are going to reach the top and Abraham is going to have to kill his own son. Abraham shifts his feet into 3<sup>rd</sup> gear to speed up. Maybe going faster will cause Isaac to become so distracted that he won’t have time to notice what’s about to happen, and Abraham won’t have time to worry. Sometimes, when terror is all around, moving faster can help, though it can never make the terror go away. Read Genesis 22 and

you'll see that when they reach the top of the mountain, Abraham kicks things into 5<sup>th</sup> gear. While it takes him 8 verses to travel to and up the mountain, it takes only 1 verse for Abraham to build an altar, pile it with wood, tie Isaac to it, and pull his knife on the boy. When God does finally step in, Abraham is forced to slam on the brakes. "Stop!" an angel of the Lord cries out. "Do not lay a hand on the boy, since now I know you fear God and would not withhold even your own son."

The story ends with a simple statement, that Abraham walked back down the mountain, caught back up with his servants, whom he had left standing there at the bottom the whole time, and they went home. What isn't included is any mention of Isaac. Did he walk beside his father on the way down as he had on the way up? "Phew Dad, that was a close one."

"Didn't I tell you it would all work out fine in the end?"

"Yeah, father always knows best. Hey dad, do you think we can stop for an ice cream on the way home?"

I don't think this is even remotely close to anything Isaac said to Abraham on their way back down the mountain. Maybe the reason there's no mention of Isaac is because the things he had to say to his father were too inappropriate to be recorded. Things a son should never say to his father. Or maybe, maybe Isaac was just nowhere to be found. As soon as Abraham had put his knife away and untied the ropes, the boy got up and hightailed it off that mountain and away from his father so fast that it would take many years and many miles before anyone could catch up with him again. In fact, Isaac and Abraham don't show up together again until it's time to bury Abraham. "That old loon tried to kill me once. I'm not showing up again until I know he's dead and in the ground."

The story of scripture is the story of our lives, and of the ways we spend our lives slowing down and speeding up in whatever ways are necessary to get through the changes that come our way. Yet, slowing down and speeding up isn't the hard or necessary thing. Back to my car analogy; anyone who drives an automatic knows how easy it is to change speeds, to speed up or slow down. What's harder, but so much more needful, is the ability to feel. "Feel the truck," my dad said. In other words, you've got to be able to feel the engine beneath your feet, to know the sound it makes when it needs you to shift gears, to make a change.

We're shifting gears in our church right now. In the last couple of days, most of us ought to have received a letter about the merging of our two Sunday services into one. Starting in two weeks on October 14<sup>th</sup>, we will hold just one service at 10 a.m. This decision has not been an easy one. Our deacons have met many times and for a long time. For those who attend the early service regularly, it may feel like the slamming on of the brakes. Like someone has stepped in front of the vehicle and said, "Sorry, we know you've been coming this way for a long time and that it's part of your weekly routine and all, but we're closing the road. You'll have to find another way now." For you, this change feels like a loss. And no matter how much anyone tells you that it will all work out fine in the end, that "Hey! there is another way, there is another service, and won't it be great to sit together as one worshipping community now?" the fact is, your chosen service has been at 8:30. Where your day can begin in the quiet of the sanctuary, where there aren't so many people, where you can receive weekly communion, and hear yourself think. I get it. I'll miss that, too. Early morning services feel like a nice slow ride in 2<sup>nd</sup> gear. To think that we'll all just come at 10 a.m. now is hopeful, but probably not realistic. I have no easy

solution for us. I can only offer us a piece of friendly advice, this not from my father but from Moses and James. From Moses: “Keep the Sabbath.” Remember, it’s a day, not an hour. It’s about the creation of community, not the preservation of community. Sabbath is something that we have to work to *keep*. It’s not going to accommodate itself to us. Sabbath’s whole aim is to disrupt our lives and our schedules. Because it knows how much we have become slaves to our busyness, and how much we allow ourselves to be robbed of rest and of the good things in life, Sabbath is not a gentle suggestion, but a clear demand to *keep* something. And most of all, Sabbath is about taking part in the story God wants to tell, a story that would not be complete without you, a story about church and what happens when people practice love and teach peace, when we rest in the delight of belonging. Keep the Sabbath.

And from James: “Pray.” Specifically, James is talking to those who are suffering and sick, urging them to pray. So sure is James of the power of prayer that he says, if you pray with faith in your heart, you’ll be healed. That almost sounds too simple, and too good to be true. I think the greater point James is trying to make is that we tend to regard prayer as this thing we do when we’ve reached our end. When we’ve run out of all other options. When the car has stalled and the engine is sputtering, we throw up a hail Mary. “Save me, Lord!” But I think prayer is just the opposite of that. I think prayer is what we’re meant to do when we want to get some place in neutral. Think about it. When you’re in neutral, the car is still running but the only way you’re going to get anywhere is if something—or someone—else moves you. That’s prayer. It’s telling God, “I’m here. I’m alive and ready to go. Now you push me to where you want me to go.”

My friends, I don't know who will be here next week or the week after that or the week after that. But I *pray*, for my sake, for your sake, and for the sake of the love we have to share and the work we have yet to do, that we'll keep coming 'round here for a long time to come. Amen.