While most of the United States observes most traffic laws in common, there are some rules that tend to vary from state to state. In some states the laws on the books can be downright goofy. Consider these weird rules if you're planning a road trip:
- In Little Rock, Arkansas, "no person shall sound the horn on a vehicle at any place where cold drinks or sandwiches are served after 9 p.m."
- In Montana, it's illegal to leave a sheep unescorted in a truck.
- In Minnesota, it's illegal to cross state lines with a duck on your head. No word on whether chickens are still authorized headgear.
- Tennessee has a law that prohibits shooting at animals from a car, unless that animal happens to be a whale. If you see a whale on the side of the road in, say, Chattanooga, Memphis or Nashville, then, by all means, blast away.
- In San Francisco, car wash owners are restricted from drying off vehicles with dirty underwear. And all God's people said, "Eew."

Sure, it's hard to imagine any circumstance where you'd need to use a duck for a hat or drive a camel on the highway (illegal in California), but there are still plenty of rules of the road that are essential if you're going to make it safely to your destination. The key, however, is to translate those rules from the driver's manual and into practical experience so that obeying them becomes second nature. That takes practice, because no one will be running in front of you waving a red flag to warn others of your approach!

The traffic laws in Jesus' day were a whole lot less stringent and weird since most people of the poorer classes traveled by foot. Jesus may have walked thousands of miles in his lifetime, all without ever honking a horn or making a left on red. But, as he traveled, he began to define a different set of rules for those who would follow him on those ancient roads and for those of us who follow him today. The story we read in today's lesson from the gospel of John illustrates that Jesus' rules of the road are timeless and vitally important if we're going to stay on the right track as his disciples.

The story opens with Jesus on the road from the place of his baptism (likely on the Jordan River near the Dead Sea) back to Galilee, his home territory. Having been baptized by John and commissioned for his mission, Jesus traveled north with Andrew and Simon Peter, his first two disciples.

Even though Galilee is the destination, we know that Jesus has a much longer journey in mind. In Bethsaida, the hometown of Andrew and Peter, Jesus encounters two men to whom he will also teach the rules of the road -- three rules to which everyone since has been called to follow if they're going to become disciples of Jesus. In fact, we could argue that these are the most important rules ever put on the books:

**Rule #1: FOLLOW.** "Follow me" (v. 43). This first rule is the equivalent of Jesus holding up a red flag and waving it in front of those who would come after him. Note that it's not a suggestion or a request but a command. It's not simply "believe in me," "think about me" or "consider me." It's "follow me." To be a disciple of Jesus is to leave the route you were on and take a narrow, one-way road behind him.

Philip is the first to hear this clearly-stated rule in John's gospel, although we hear Jesus using those two simple words of command to the disciples elsewhere in the gospels. Philip's first response to this rule is to go and get another follower. So compelling is this rule, that Philip recognizes it's one that everyone needs to observe. The first person Philip tells is Nathanael who, interestingly, doesn't appear in any of the other gospel lists of the Twelve. John's point might be that Jesus' command to "follow me" isn't just for those original 12 disciples but for everyone. Philip immediately sees that Jesus is the one about "whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth" (v. 45). Jesus, in other words, is the one to whom all the ancient Scriptural rules of the road point.
Nathanael, however, sees the idea of a Messiah coming from Nazareth to be about as likely as a whale in Tennesee. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" he scoffs (v. 46). Obviously, Nazareth had a bad reputation!

Following Jesus means picking one direction -- one person -- to follow. It's the equivalent of veering off the superhighway and driving down a dirt road, which is why it's a major deviation from the rules everyone else is following (Matthew 7:13). Later in John's gospel Jesus will say, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6). Jesus is calling people to follow him on the one road that leads straight to the heart of God and God's mission.

Too often we've defined the rules of Christian faith in terms of what we believe about Jesus instead of focusing on actually following him and doing as he does. Information is important, but imitating Jesus is really the heart of discipleship. The only way we can really know what he is about is by going all in, pushing down the accelerator and following him, which leads us to the second rule:

**Rule #2: COME.** "Come and see" (v. 46). Philip responds to Nathanael's skepticism with an invitation to "come and see" what Jesus is about. Philip doesn't try to argue or coerce. Rather, he invites him to come and meet the rabbi. Where Nathanael puts a stop sign, Philip sees a green light. Philip knew that his skeptical friend would respond best to an invitation (the same invitation that Jesus had given to Andrew and Peter in v. 39).

Nathanael accepts the invitation and, to his amazement, discovers that Jesus already knows him (vv. 47-48). We're all invited to follow one who already knows everything there is to know about us. When we come to Jesus and when we invite others to "come and see," we know that he's ready to come and dwell with us with no honking horns necessary. Philip will become a great evangelist because he sees everyone as simply needing an invitation and will spend most of his life on the road inviting others to "come and see" (Acts 8:4-40).

One of the key rules of the road for being a disciple is having a desire and a way for inviting people to come and meet Jesus. Who can you invite to "come and see?"

**Rule #3: YOU AIN'T SEEN NOTHING YET!** "You will see greater things than these" (v. 50). Nathanael was amazed that Jesus knew him, but if that in itself was amazing, Jesus told his new disciple that the best was yet to come. The rest of John's gospel reveals those amazing things. Those who accepted his invitation witnessed healings, exorcisms, miracles, the transfiguration and, most importantly, resurrection.

Later in the gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that even the miraculous things they witnessed were nothing compared to what they would do when he was gone. "Very truly I tell you," Jesus told his fellow travelers, "the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these …" Those who accept the challenge of following Jesus and the invitation to come and see have the potential to do the things that Jesus did.

Many Christians, however, are content with doing only what is comfortable; following the rules that are easiest to obey and taking only the roads that are clearly marked, safe and smoothly traveled. The disciples of Jesus learned, however, that following Jesus is actually a journey filled with strange and exciting opportunities to rewrite the rules. It's an invitation to run off the map and to flout the self-imposed rules that keep us, and those around us, from experiencing true, abundant life.

We all have to obey the rules, both goofy and great, whenever we strap into the car. Strapping into the life of discipleship, however, is a much wilder ride, but with a better destination! So fasten your seatbelts! (A law, by the way.) It'll going to be a bumpy ride! But the destination is worth it!

**Pastor Keith**