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Opinion | OP-ED COLUMNIST

How Would Jesus Drive?

David Brooks JAN. 4, 2018

Over the past several years we have done an outstanding job of putting total sleazoids at the top of our society: Trump, Bannon, Ailes, Weinstein, Cosby, etc. So it was good to get a reminder, from Pope Francis in his New Year's Eve homily, that the people who have the most influence on society are actually the normal folks, through their normal, everyday gestures being kind in public places, attentive to the elderly. The pope called such people, in a beautiful phrase, "the artisans of the common good."

Small deeds, he said, "express concretely love for the city ... without giving speeches, without publicity, but with a style of practical civic education for daily life."

The pope focused especially on driving, praising those people "who move in traffic with good sense and prudence." As Richard Reeves of the Brookings Institution points out, driving is precisely the sort of everyday activity through which people mold the culture of their community.

If you speed up so I can't merge into your lane, you're teaching me that the society around here is basically competitive, not cooperative. If, on the other hand, you give me a friendly wave after I let you in, you're teaching me that this is a place where a kindness is recognized and gratitude is expressed.

If you feel perfectly fine doing a three-point turn in the middle of a busy street, blocking everybody else going both ways, you teach me that people here are selfish and feel entitled. But if you get over to the right and wait your turn in a crowded highway exit lane, rather than cutting in at the last moment, that teaches me that there's a sense of fairness and equality, and that people feel embedded in the group.

Driving is governed by law, but it's also shaped by norms. If enough people adopt the same driving style, then that behavior hardens into a communal disposition. Once people understand what is normal around here, more people tend to drive that way, too, and you get this amplified, snowball effect. Kindness breeds kindness. Aggression breeds aggression.

We all know that driving cultures vary widely from city to city. My impression is that people in Seattle dawdle, people in Los Angeles get right up on your tail but are pretty skilled about it, and those of us from the New York/New Jersey area treat driving as if it were foreplay to genocide.

Studies have been done, of course. According to Allstate, the most accident-prone drivers live in Boston; Baltimore; Worcester, Mass.; Washington, D.C.; and Springfield, Mass. (Way to go, Massachusetts!) The safest drivers live in Kansas City, Kan.; Brownsville, Tex.; Madison, Wis.; and Huntsville, Ala.

A company called Automatic makes a device that measures how cars race through traffic. It finds that drivers in Phoenix, Tucson and Memphis are the most aggressive and those in Honolulu; Portland, Ore.; and Seattle are the least.

The cultural gaps among nations are even more stark. According to a 2003 Gallup survey, 65 percent of American and Russian drivers thought they'd been subjected to aggressive behavior from others, compared with only 26 percent of Japanese drivers. There are significant differences in driving culture between disciplined northern European countries and the more permissive southern ones, where lane markers are regarded as dubious suggestions.

Some traffic patterns require a tradition of deference to central authority. According to *The Economist*, half the world's traffic circles are in France, where they work well. In Nairobi, they are a complete disaster.

Driving means making a thousand small moral decisions: whether to tailgate to push the slowpoke faster, or to give space; whether to honk only as a warning or constantly as your all-purpose show of contempt for humanity.

Driving puts you in a constant position of asking, Are we in a place where there is a system of self-restraint, or are we in a place where it's dog eat dog?

Driving puts you in a constant position of asking, Are my needs more important than everybody else's, or are we all equal? BMW drivers are much less likely to brake for pedestrians at crosswalks. Prius drivers in San Francisco commit more traffic violations. People who think they are richer or better than others are ruder behind the wheel.

Driving also puts you in a position where you are periodically having to overrule your desire for revenge. When somebody cuts you off, you want to punish the jerk and enforce all that is right and good. But that only leads to a cycle of even worse driving, so it's better, as Francis would say, to turn the other cheek. How would Jesus drive?

In short, driving puts you into social situations in which you have to co-construct a shared culture of civility, and go against your own primeval selfishness, and it does so while you are encased in what is potentially a 4,000-pound metal weapon.

Of course, we are all appalled at the clowns who are bespoiling our culture from the top. But I'm going to try to remember one lesson when I hit the road: Though I may be surrounded by idiots, I'm potentially an artisan of the common good.

Paul Krugman is off today.

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