Sunday, August 30, 1987
LIFE'S "NO PARKING" PLACES
Mark 6:7-11, 9:2-8

A few weeks ago, I had to attend a meeting in downtown Lincoln. As I approached my destination, I began to look for a place to park. There are all kinds of parking places downtown. Many are on the street, others are in parking lots and garages. There are also spaces that look ideal for parking, but if you look carefully, you notice various warning signs that say in one way or another, "NO PARKING" here. Some simply state, "NO PARKING." Others add warnings like "TOW AWAY ZONE," "NO STOPPING," or "NO STANDING." And there are places that allow parking but only during certain hours of the day, with signs warning that parking is not allowed on one side of the street from 7:00 to 9:00 A.M. or from 4:00 to 6:00 P.M. There are also spots designated for handicapped parking only.

Have you noticed that there are "NO PARKING" places in life as well? If you park in the wrong place in life, you can get into trouble. You risk being "ticketed" by stunted growth or "fined" by arrested development. Or your life, like your car, can get "towed away," and you may have difficulty finding it again.

This morning, let's look in more detail at some of the "NO PARKING" places in life, and we will do so in the context of the Christian faith, as followers of Jesus Christ.

The first "NO PARKING" place in life is failure. All of us are familiar with failure because no one succeeds all the time. Our lives are filled with small and large failures. We might get passed over for a promotion, not make the grades we want in school, have children who don't turn out the way we hoped, not earn as much money as we'd like, experience a decline in health, or see our marriage fail.
The problem is that some of us don't get over failure. We park there. We find ourselves unable to move on. We dwell on our failures and relive them over and over again.

Jesus knew his disciples wouldn't always be successful — that they would sometimes fail — so he gave them advice about not parking in failure. When he sent them out two by two, he said, "If any place will not receive you and they refuse to hear you, then leave; don't stay there — don't prolong the failure. And not only should you leave the place, but shake off the dust that is on your feet." In other words, don't carry any of the failure with you. Leave it behind and get on with your work. Or to use our metaphor — failure is a "NO PARKING ZONE." None of us can ever totally avoid failure, but we can avoid parking there.

A minister friend of mine told me about a woman in his parish who had parked in the "NO PARKING ZONE" of failure and refused to move. She spent all her days fretting about how badly life had treated her. She had once been a bright career woman with a responsible government position, but she became bitter after a series of events led to her dismissal. To cut expenses and conserve a meager income, she moved into the basement of her house and rented out the upstairs. There, she lived in chilly isolation with her cat, brooding over ways to get even. Every waking minute, she stewed in her own misery, calling anyone who would listen to her story. She bemoaned her failure, her helplessness, and blamed the community for being heartless and cruel.

She would call her minister and talk non-stop for an hour or more. If he tried to end the call, she would say, "You're just like all the rest — no time to listen to someone who needs your

help.” He tried to connect her with potential friends — people who were patient and caring — but she soon drained them with her endless wailing. She had parked in the “NO PARKING ZONE” of failure and refused to move.

Ask yourself this morning: what “NO PARKING ZONE” of failure are you parked in? Maybe it’s time to move on, time to shake the dust off your feet and get going, time to leave the failure behind.

A second “NO PARKING ZONE” in life is success. That probably sounds odd to most of you. We’ve all heard the saying, “Nothing succeeds like success,” but the opposite is also true— "Nothing fails like success.”
What we forget is that any success we achieve is still only limited progress. We can be sure that things will change, and unless we change, what was once success will no longer be. The inventor of the electric typewriter initially took his invention to the most successful typewriter manufacturer of his day. But that company was so successful in selling its manual typewriters that it saw no market for the new device. So, the company turned down his invention. He then took his electric typewriter to a young, struggling company. It liked the idea and began to manufacture and improve it. That company today is IBM. This has been true in many other fields as well. Companies that initially enjoyed great success could not reassess their strategies, and they missed the changing market. Success can blind us. If we park in our success, we will miss the changes going on around us. Life moves on. What we view as success today may be bypassed by something new tomorrow. Success can lead to numbness. We come to believe that we have it made and that what is true today will always be that way. And so we park there and refuse to change or move. What we forget is — success is a “NO PARKING ZONE!”

When Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him for a time of prayer on the mountain, they had an overwhelming experience. It was so moving, so energizing, that Peter suggested they build three booths and stay there. However, Jesus knew that wasn’t possible. One cannot hold on to such mystical experiences for very long — it’s a “NO PARKING ZONE,” the same as success. The vision fades, and we have to come down the mountain and move on.

A third “NO PARKING ZONE” in life is unforgiveness. I meet so many people who are parked in that zone. They have been deeply hurt in the past by someone, wounded, wronged, and they cannot forgive the person who hurt them.
He was a big, powerful-looking man. As his story unfolded, he disclosed a childhood of abuse, desertion, and loneliness. He felt he had tried everything — various therapies, groups, moving away, acting out — and yet his sense of being a victim persisted, even after his parents had died. One day, in desperation, he turned to his pastor and said, “What else can I do?” His pastor replied, “You can forgive them.” He exploded. “They don’t deserve forgiveness. They deserve punishment.” When he became quiet, his pastor asked, “How long are you going to stay in the ‘NO PARKING ZONE’ of unforgiveness? How long are you going to hang on to your hate, to your resentment? You need to let them go in order to live now. If you forgive them, you won’t have to keep trying to forget.” The man thought about it for a long time. Later, he was ready, and even though his parents were dead, he said out loud, “I forgive you,” and then he began to cry for the first time since his parents had died. After that, his new freedom began to appear in his body and in his smile.

Unforgiveness is a “NO PARKING ZONE” in life, and yet so many people still try to park there. You may be able to pull into that zone and stop for a bit, but if you try to stay too long, your life is going to be in trouble.

Jesus put forgiveness at the center of our spiritual lives. We are to forgive others as God continually forgives us. True forgiveness is never earned — it is given as a free and undeserved gift.

Another “NO PARKING ZONE” in life is living in the past. We park there and are afraid to move. We are often unaware that it is a “NO PARKING ZONE.” Living in the past can take many forms, but this morning, let’s look at only one of them — being a prisoner of our childhood and still trying to live up to well-meaning yet misguided parental directives.
A seminary professor had arrived early for a seminar to put on the water for tea and coffee. A student was waiting and greeted him with the words, “I can’t participate in this seminar.” The professor said he was sorry and invited the student into his office to talk about it. As she talked, it became evident that she was a prisoner of her childhood. The professor and the student met three or four more times, and her story came out. She had been forced to take over the responsibilities of the family at a young age. Years later, she was still trying to live up to parental directives that were stifling her in the present. She wrote them out: “Don’t get angry. Control your temper. Don’t expect too much from life. Grow up. Don’t cry about it. Everyone gets hurt. Work a little harder next time — give more of yourself. Parents are martyrs for their children.”

She was still parked in the “NO PARKING ZONE” of bygone and well-meaning but misguided parental directives from the past.

In her book, Betty: A Glad Awakening, Betty Ford writes about her addiction to alcohol and drugs and how she overcame it with the proper treatment. Before she entered a treatment program, her husband and children, two doctors, a nurse, and a couple of friends gathered to tell her they were concerned about her failing health and that they all thought she had a problem with alcohol and drugs. She’d never heard of an “intervention,” but now she had to listen to what her family and friends were telling her. She thought to herself, “My makeup wasn’t smeared, I wasn’t disheveled, I behaved politely, and I never finished off a bottle, so how could I be alcoholic? And I wasn’t on heroin or cocaine. The medicines I took — the sleeping pills, the pain pills, the relaxer pills — had been prescribed by doctors, so how could I be a drug addict? I had done everything in my power for my husband and our four children I loved so much. I had done everything in my power to help my husband’s career. In my own mind, at least, I had always been there for them, and I truly believed I had given a hundred percent. My mother’s voice was always in my ear—‘If you can’t do it right, don’t do it at all.’ And now I was hearing that I had failed! You have to understand that my family was not saying this. My family was saying that I had a disease. They were saying, ‘Mother, you’re sick, we love you, and we want to help you.’ But what I heard was that I had let them down.”

“If you can’t do it right, don’t do it at all"—that’s a misguided directive from the past that is a “NO PARKING ZONE” for all of us. There’s very little I would do at all if I had to follow that saying to the letter. Somehow, we have to allow ourselves to make mistakes and then go on from there, leaving the mistakes behind.

Jesus Christ tells us that the Good News is that we don’t have to live in the prisons of our past. Today is the day of salvation. Now is the acceptable time. We can say goodbye to that past and to those directives that haunt us. They are “NO PARKING ZONES,” and if we continue to park in the past, the penalties will have to be paid.

Watch out for the “NO PARKING” places in life! Amen.