Book 17

SUNDAY, AUGUST 30, 1987

"LIFE'S 'NO PARKING' PLACES"

Mark 6:7-11
Mark 9:2-8

A few weeks ago I had to attend a meeting in downtown Lincoln, and 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 in parking garages. There are also all kinds of spaces which look like they would be ideal places to park, but if you look carefully, you notice the various kinds of warning signs which tell you in one way or another there is "NO PARKING" here. Some simply say that--"NO PARKING." Others add the warning, "TOW AWAY ZONE." Still others warn there is "NO STOPPING," or "NO STANDING." And there are other places which allow parking, but only during certain hours of the day. The signs warn the driver there is to be no parking along this side of the street from 7:00 to 9:00 A.M. or from 4:00 to 6:00 P.M. There are also places in parking lots and in parking garages and along the street which indicate there is parking for the handicapped only.

Have you also noticed that there are parking places and "NO PARKING" places in life as

well? If you park in life in the wrong place, you can get into trouble. You risk being ticketed or fined by stunted growth or arrested development. Or your life, like your car, can get towed away and you have difficulty locating it.

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

1. The first "NO PARKING" place in life is failure. All of us are familiar with failure, for there is no one among us who succeeds all the time. Our lives are filled with little failures and big ones. We get passed over for a promotion. We do not make the grades in school that we would like to make. Our children do not turn out the way we had hoped. We are not making as much money as we would like. Our health fails, or maybe our marriage fails.

The problem is that some of us who fail do not get over it. We park there. We find ourselves unable to move on. We cannot leave failure behind. We dwell on our failures and live in them over and over again.

Jesus knew his disciples would not always be successful--that they would sometimes fail, so

he gave them some 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 of that place 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 of her day fretting about how badly life had treated her. She once had been a bright career woman who had a responsible government position, but she had become bitter because of a series of events which resulted in her dismissal. To cut expenses and to 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 on 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 so heartless

and cruel.

She would call her minister and talk non-stop for an hour or more. If he tried to end the phone 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 untiringly patient and caring) but she soon sucked them dry by 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.

2. A second "NO PARKING ZONE" in life is that of success. Now that probably sounds a little bit odd to most of you. We've all heard the saying--Nothing succeeds like success--however, the opposite is also true--Nothing fails like success.

What we forget is that any success that we have or 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 at first took his new invention to the most successful typewriter manufacturer of his day. But that company was so successful in selling its manual typewriters that it could see 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. It's 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 today view as success will be bypassed by something new tomorrow. Success can lead to numbness. We come to believe that we have it made and that what is so 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 that 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.

3. 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 that individual who has hurt them.

He was a big, powerful looking man. As his story unfolded he disclosed a childhood of abuse, desertion, and loneliness. He felt that 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's reply was, "You can forgive them." He exploded. "They don't deserve forgiveness. They deserve punishment." When he became quiet, his pastor asked him, "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 in that "NO PARKING ZONE," 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.

4. Another "NO PARKING ZONE" in life is that of 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. However, this morning let's look at only one of them--that of being a prisoner of our childhood and still trying to live up to well-meaning, yet misguided parental directions.

A seminary professor had arrived early for the seminar in order 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 which 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 to tell her 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 make-up 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 that 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 good-bye 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 have to be paid.

Watch out for the "NO PARKING" places in life! AMEN.