Sunday, July 16, 1995
DESTINATION CHECK
Matthew 7:7-14

If you've ever taken a trip on a commercial airline, you've probably had this experience. My wife and I boarded a plane in Miami, Florida, for our return trip to Lincoln via Chicago. Before the flight attendant closed the door so we could be pushed back from the gate and the crew could start the engines for the taxi to the runway, the gate agent came on board and announced, "This is a destination check. You are on United flight #689, and its destination is Chicago's O'Hare Airport. If that is not your destination, now is the time to exit this flight."

I thought to myself, "What a terrific sermon idea — a destination check. That's what all of us need, not only on our business or vacation trips but also on our life's journey. Not only when we are young and starting out, but at various points throughout our lives, a destination check."

Almost every day, we need to have someone help us to ask ourselves, "In my life's journey, am I headed for the destination I desire and that best fulfills my potential and God's purpose for me? Am I on the right flight to get me there?" That's what Jesus did when he met people. He asked them to change their destination in life by following his way.

We all know stories about people who do not pay attention to whether or not they are on the flight that will take them to their desired destination, and so they wind up in the wrong place. A traveler boarded a plane in Los Angeles, and the flight gate agent came on board with the usual destination check announcement. The traveler did not listen carefully and landed in Auckland, New Zealand. He wanted to go to Oakland, California. He thought that was what he heard the gate agent announce as the destination.

Back in the 1950s, Harry Emerson Fosdick told a similar story about a man who caught the wrong bus. This passenger, according to a newspaper story, boarded a bus with the full intention and desire of going to Detroit, but when at the end of a long trip he came to his destination, he found himself not in Detroit but in Kansas City. He caught the wrong bus. He could not at first believe it. Stepping from the bus, he asked for Woodward Avenue. He was indignant. The person he asked for directions said there was no Woodward Avenue. He knew his Detroit; there was a Woodward Avenue. It was some time before he could face the fact that despite the clarity of his desire and his intention, he was not in Detroit but in Kansas City. He had caught the wrong bus.

Remember the story Jesus told about the Prodigal Son. That young man's destination was not the pig feeding lot. His desire was centered on happiness, freedom, independence, adventure — good goals that he could justify to himself, his family, and friends. These are all good destinations in general, but the means he chose landed him somewhere else altogether.

Some people, of course, do not even know their destination, or if they did know it, they forget it. Oliver Wendell Holmes tells of the time he couldn't find his ticket after he was aboard a train and it was underway. The conductor watched him fumble through his pockets almost desperately. "You don't need a ticket, Mr. Holmes," said the railroad official. "You will probably find it later, and then it will be OK if you mail it to the Pennsylvania Railroad Co. with a note of explanation." Holmes scowled and said, "The problem isn't the ticket, sir; the problem is, where am I going?"

There was a speaker with an engagement to speak in a certain city, and he arrived on a flight that was late. He got a taxi at the airport as quickly as possible and said to the driver, “Drive fast, step on it.” And the driver did. He stepped on it.

And when, after some fifteen minutes, speeding through the streets and skidding around corners, the speaker asked, “Aren’t we about there?” The taxi driver said, “I don’t know, sir; you never told me where we were to go.” Some people are like that — busy, hectic, with no determining destination to guide their lives.

Life is filled with such experiences. During the school year, I frequently drive by the Lincoln High School parking lot in the mornings before school has begun or even after I know classes are in session, and in the afternoons right after school has let out or even before school is supposed to be out. There I see young people in all sorts of dress; some of them are going to be late for school and don’t care, and in the afternoon, others have left school early. Most of them are smoking cigarettes or maybe something stronger and hanging out, some with hands on each other’s bodies in inappropriate places, and I wonder if they have thought about what their destination might be in life. And if so, are they on the wrong flight in life’s journey, and will they end up where they do not want to be and wonder how they got there? We all need destination checks on a regular basis in our lives. Some people wander around through life and then are surprised when they end up in a hell of their own making.

Many marriage ceremonies are celebrated in this church building, and I am grateful that the people who come here to be married want that wedding to take place in a church. Marriage, whether celebrated in a church or not, is a sacred act. In talking with them, they all hope their marriage will succeed.

For the most part, they have so many beautiful dreams. But as Harry Emerson Fosdick said, “I see so many marriages where I officiate, start for Utopia and end in Reno, that I find myself at the marriage service offering a homely prayer that no one hears, ‘God grant they may catch the right bus.'” In the same way as Fosdick, I find myself praying the same prayer.

It is one thing to have the right dreams, to have high and worthy goals in life, but too often we let it go at that and forget to ask the second question: Are we on the flight that will take us to where we want to go, now, today, in our immediate, practical habits and choices? Have we had a destination check?

One way to make a quick daily destination check is to ask yourself, whenever you have to make a choice, two questions: What are the consequences of this choice I am making, and will this choice bring fulfillment and happiness to me and also to those who are affected by this choice? Will this decision help me to arrive at my desired destination?

Furthermore, it is one thing, and comparatively easy too, to desire something ideal and right; it is another thing to be willing to pay the price.

Remember Aesop’s fable on “Belling the Cat.” One day the mice held a general council to consider what they might do to protect themselves against their common enemy, the Cat. Some said one thing, and some said another, but at last, a Young Mouse stood up and announced that he had a plan which he thought would solve the problem. “You will all agree,” said he, “that our chief danger lies in the unexpected and sly manner in which our enemy comes upon us. Now, if we could receive some warning of her approach, we could easily hide from her. I propose, therefore, that a small bell be obtained and attached by a ribbon to the

neck of the Cat. In this way, we could always know when she was coming and be able to make our escape." This proposal met with great applause until an Old Mouse arose and said, "This is all very fine, but who among us is so brave? Who will bell the Cat?" The mice looked at one another in silence, and nobody volunteered.

It is one thing to desire something; it is another thing to be willing to pay the price.

Do you want to be a good parent? Are you willing to pay the price? Do you want your children to grow up with a solid spiritual foundation? Are you willing to pay the price?

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it."

In every aspect of life, there is this truth. All great achievement — intellectual, artistic, spiritual, ethical — is reached in Jesus' meaning of the word, not by a broad, loose meandering road, with no destination in mind, but by a narrow way.

Fine ideals, good desires in general — these are not too difficult to obtain. But how to get there? Which flight are you on this morning in your practical, immediate habits and ways of living? Are some of you on the wrong flight? Have you taken the wrong bus?

Obviously, we are dealing here with one of the commonest causes of brokenhearted regret and penitence. It is so easy to get on the wrong flight. We do it when we do not mean to. We get on it without realizing we are there, taking with us the fine dreams and goals and all the time thinking, like that man going to Oakland, that we are headed where we want to go, whereas we are really going somewhere else.

So in your life's journey and in mine, there are three important questions you need to ask and answer: (1) What is my destination in my life's journey? (2) Is it the right one for me? Or to use religious language, is my chosen destination in line with God's purpose for my life? and (3) Am I on the road, the bus, the flight that will get me there?

Now, in all of this, I am assuming that you agree with the metaphor that life is like a journey. It's the metaphor that the Bible and our Christian faith use more than any other. "All metaphors are imperfect," as one person said, "But that is the beauty of them." I say this because there are people I meet who do not understand life in this world as a journey, or if they do, don't live that way. Life, to them, is more like a warehouse. All they want to do is to acquire things and hang onto them. They believe that the meaning of life is to be found in the abundance of things they possess. They don't want to go anywhere, but want to stand still and hang onto what they have. Jesus told a story about such a person—"The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'"

How do you find the right destination for you in your life's journey? First, you need to ask and find the answer as to why God created you. What is your purpose? "Nothing is more likely to help a person overcome or endure troubles than the consciousness of having a task in life."

Viktor Frankl wrote those words as he endured the brutality and insanity of a Nazi concentration camp during the Second World War.

According to our Christian faith, God created you for a purpose. You have a unique talent and a unique way of expressing it. There is something you can do that will make a contribution to this world. You need to discover what your unique talents are and how you can serve humanity through them, and only you can do that.

The specific details of each one of our purposes in life will vary, and how we live out our purposes will vary. Allow me to be personal as an illustration. I accept the fact that I was born in April 1931, and that with my birth, God had an overall purpose in life for me. I believe that I had and still have the power to choose to align myself with that purpose, to board the flight that will take me toward that destination, or I can take a flight that will take me somewhere else. When I am headed toward the right destination for me, then life has a certain flow and joy which are absent when I am going in the wrong direction.

So I urge you in your life's journey to make frequent destination checks. Make those destination checks in your overall life's journey and in the many smaller trips which are also part of your main journey. If you are married, is your marriage heading in the right direction? If you are a parent, are you heading toward the destination you desire?

In your spiritual journey, are you continuing to grow and mature? The big question is, are you going toward the destination that God desires for you? In other words, are you following the way of Jesus? Amen.