Sunday, August 28, 2005
NO PARKING
Matthew 16:21-26

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 my car. There are all kinds of parking places downtown. Many are on the street with parking meters, others are in parking lots and parking garages.

There are also all kinds of places that appear to be ideal for parking, but if you look carefully, you notice the various warning signs that tell you in one way or another that there is "NO PARKING" allowed. Some of the signs state plainly, "NO PARKING." Others add the warning, "TOW AWAY ZONE." Still, other signs tell you, "NO STOPPING," or "NO STANDING." There are also signs indicating that parking is allowed but only during specific hours of the day. For example, there is no parking along this side of the street from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m., or from 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. There are also reserved places for people with handicaps to park.

As I was reading these signs, especially those that said, "NO PARKING," the thought occurred to me that there are also "NO PARKING" places in life. If you park in life in one of these NO PARKING zones, you can get into trouble. You risk being ticketed, and the result is stunted growth or arrested development. In life, if you park in a tow-away zone and you are towed away, you can have difficulty finding yourself again.

Although Jesus didn't use the exact terms, he said in other ways that there are NO PARKING places and TOW AWAY zones in life, and these need to be avoided.

The first NO PARKING place in life, according to Jesus, is failure. Is there anyone listening who is not familiar with failure? No one that I know of succeeds all the time. Our lives are filled with little failures and big ones. You get passed over for a promotion. You do not make the grades in school that you had hoped to make. Your children are not turning out the way you planned. You get fired from your job. You've made a bad investment. You trusted someone and were betrayed. You failed someone you had promised to help. Your marriage failed.

It's not possible to avoid failure. No one gets a hit every time at bat and has a thousand batting average. The problem is that some people park in the no parking zone of failure. They do not move on. They cannot leave failure behind. They dwell on their failures and live in them over and over again.

Jesus knew his followers would not always be successful — that they would sometimes fail. So he gave them some good advice about not parking in failure. When he sent his disciples out two by two, he told them, "If any place will not receive you, and they refuse to hear you, then leave. Don't stay there; don't prolong the failure." He went on to say, "Shake the dust of that place off 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. You cannot totally avoid failure, but you can avoid parking there.

A ministerial colleague told me about a woman in his congregation who had parked in the NO PARKING zone of failure and refused to move. She spent all of her days fretting about how badly life had treated her. She had been a bright career woman with a responsible government

position, but she had become bitter because of a series of events that resulted in 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 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 like all the rest — no time to listen to someone who needs your help.” He did his best to connect her with potential friends (people who were untiringly patient and caring), but she soon wore them out with her perpetual complaining. She had parked in the NO PARKING place of failure and refused to leave.

Ask yourself today, are you parked in some kind of NO PARKING zone of failure? Maybe it’s time to move on as Jesus suggested. Shake the dust off your feet and get going. It’s time to leave the failure behind.

Winston Churchill said, “Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.” Someone else said, “The person who makes no mistakes usually does not make anything.”

A second NO PARKING zone in life, according to Jesus, is success. Maybe that sounds a bit odd to you. You’ve heard the saying, “Nothing succeeds like success.” However, the opposite can also be true: “Nothing fails like success.”

What is forgotten is that any success you have or achieve is still only limited progress. You can be sure that things will change, and unless you change, what was once success will no longer be. The inventor of the electric typewriter initially 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 is today IBM. Now, of course, computers with word processing have made electric typewriters obsolete.

This story has been repeated in many fields. Companies that initially enjoyed success could not reassess their strategies and missed the changing market. Success can blind you. If you park in your success, you will miss the changes going on around you. Life moves on. What you view as success today will be bypassed by something new tomorrow. Success can lead to numbness. You can believe you have it made and that what is so today will always be that way, and so you park there and refuse to change or move. What you 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 inspiring, so beautiful, that they wanted to build three dwellings and stay there. Jesus knew this was not a good idea. You cannot hold on to a mystical experience for very long. It’s a NO PARKING zone, the same as failure and success. The vision fades, and you have to come down the mountain and get back to work.

In the scripture reading from Matthew for today, Jesus said to his followers, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

A third NO PARKING zone in life is unforgiveness. I meet so many people who are parked there. They have been deeply wounded by someone in the past, and they cannot forgive that individual 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 that he had tried everything: various therapy groups, moving away, acting out, and yet his sense of being a victim persisted even after his parents died.

One day, he turned to his minister in desperation and said, “What else can I do?” The minister replied, “You can forgive them.” He exploded, “They don’t deserve forgiveness. They deserve punishment.” When he quieted down, his minister asked him, “How long are you going to stay in the NO PARKING zone of unforgiveness? How long are you going to hang onto your hate and resentment? Is your unwillingness to forgive helping you in any way? Are you feeling better because of it? You can’t be punishing your parents. They have died. You are only hurting yourself.”

The man thought about it for a long time. Later, he was ready to leave this NO PARKING zone. Even though his parents were dead, he said out loud, “I forgive you.” 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 park there. You might be able to pull into that zone for a bit, but if you try to stay too long, your life is going to be miserable.

Jesus put forgiveness at the center of spiritual life and health. You are to forgive others as God continually forgives you. True forgiveness is never earned; it is given as a free and undeserved gift.

A fourth NO PARKING zone in life is that of living in the past. It’s so tempting to park there and not move on. You can even be unaware that you have parked in a NO PARKING zone because living in the past can take many forms. Today, let’s consider only one of them — that of being a prisoner of your childhood and still trying to live up to well-meaning but no longer useful parental expectations.

A seminary professor arrived early for the seminar he was leading in order to put on 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 to hear that and invited her into his office to talk about it. As she talked, it became evident that she was a captive 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, so expect it. 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 no longer useful parental directives of 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 what they all thought about her 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 an alcoholic? And I wasn't on heroin or cocaine. The medicines I took — the sleeping 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 had done everything 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.' Now I was hearing that I failed. You have to understand that my family was not 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. It is a NO PARKING zone. There's very little that you would do at all if you had to follow that saying to the letter.

Jesus teaches you that life is a process. Of course, there are times when you need to park, when you need to rest so that you can move on. But watch out for the NO PARKING zones in life. Amen.