Book 11

Sunday May 2, 1982

"SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN" John 8:1-11, Matthew 18:21-22

One of the great prison wardens of this country often tells this story of a modern day miracle. A friend of his happened to be sitting in a railroad coach next to a young man who was obviously depressed. Finally the man revealed that he was a convict returning from a distant prison. His imprisonment had brought shame on his family, and they had neither visited him nor written often. He hoped, however, that this was only because they were to poor to travel, to uneducated to write. He hoped, despite the evidence, that they had forgiven him.

To make it easy for them, however, he had written them to put up a signal for him when the train passed their little farm on the outskirts of town. If his family had forgiven him they were to put up a white ribbon in the big apple tree near the tracks. If they didn't want him back they were to do nothing, and he would stay on the train, go west, and probably become a hobo.

As the train neared his home town his suspense became so great he couldn't bear to look out the window. His companion changed places with him and said he would watch for the apple tree. In a minute, he put his hand on the young convict's arm. "There it is," he whispered, his eyes bright with sudden tears. "It's all right, the whole tree is white with ribbons."

In that instant, all the bitterness that had poisoned a life was dispelled. "I felt as if I had witnessed a miracle," the other man said, "Perhaps I had!"

Forgiveness does perform miracles! It is a miracle! And it's an integral and central part of our Christian faith. The whole New Testament is the story of forgiveness.

Unforgiveness is a tragedy! Recently I heard of another convict released from prison. He was in a restaurant here in Lincoln, and saw across the room a man he had some years ago known as a friend. He approached that man's table to renew his acquaintance. As he introduced himself, the other man turned away and said, I

don't know you and never have."

Jesus forgave persons their sins and he was criticized for it. Remember the story of the woman caught in adultery which was our scripture lesson for the morning. He forgave her and literally saved her life.

Recall the parable of the prodigal son which Jesus told--how the father forgave the son and welcomed him back into his household. The son sought amnesty and it was granted to him by his father.

Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners, forgave them, accepted them. Remember Zaccheas in the Sycamore tree--"Come down from the tree, Zaccheaus, I must eat at your house today," said Jesus, and in accepting him, he forgave him. A man's life was transformed--a miracle.

One of the main petitions of the Lord's Prayer contains forgiveness--"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." And in the letter to the Ephesians, we read--"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you." Jesus on the cross in his dying moments, cried out--"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Once Peter asked Jesus--"Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus answered, "I do not say to you seven times, but seven times seventy."

Forgiveness is at the very center of our faith! Paul wrote to the Romans, "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." Yet for us, forgiveness is not always easy, even though it is at the center of our faith. We all know the difficulty in forgiveness when we began talking about amnesty for the young men who have gone to Canada or Sweden to avoid the war in Vietnam. Wherever the question was debated we could hear such statements as--"Why should we forgive these traitors and cowards and welcome them back?"

There are several sides to the miracle of forgiveness, and they are inter-related.

1. First there is forgiveness of others. We know how difficult this can be. The minor irritations we can usually take in stride. But the serious hurts, betrayal

or rejection by someone close to us fills us with the blind urge to return hurt for hurt.

Indeed the worst hurt any of us can experience is the hurt suffered at the hands of someone we love and from whom we expect love. There are other hurts we seek to avoid or flee from, such as physical injuries and injuries resulting from the loss of money, job or property. But bad as they are, they cannot and do not hurt us as seriously as personal hurts. Personal hurts, hurt on the inside; the other hurt on the outside. Inside hurts are often more injurious than outside ones because we are dependent on one another; and when we have been hurt by another person, there is the feeling that we have been cut off, separated, alienated.

When relationships have been cut off, they are hard to restore--we feel separated and unable to get together. This happens a great deal in marriage and in the family where people live intimately together and where a good relationship is of vital importance. "If I had my way," said a wise old lawyer, "I'd change the marriage vows and promises to read--love, honor and forgive!"

In marriage, in the family, or in any relationship, the healing of forgiveness often takes much time and effort. One young couple had been married only two years when the wife discovered from letters in her husband's suitcase that he had been unfaithful to her. She kept her knowledge secret, but the longer she suppressed her resentment, the more it grew. She began to drink too much and to neglect her appearance; her hurt and anger ~~was~~ were coming out sideways.

One day, while looking for a safety pin, the husband found one of his letters hidden in his wife's sewing basket. With no more reason for deception, he confessed what he had done and asked to be forgiven. She agreed to let by-gones be by-gones, but the past kept coming up in bitter quarrels, and husband and wife grew farther apart.

Finally, through a marriage counselor, they began to see their mistake. The wife discovered that instead of truly forgiving her husband, she had instead tried to pretend there was nothing to forgive. She had to experience all over again the hurt that her husband had

caused her. He had to face his feelings. And as her resentment, so long supressed, came pouring out, love flooded back into her life. Forgiveness created a new situation in which she once more began to trust the man who had wronged her.

You see, forgiveness does not undo what has already been done; it enables us to accept what has been done and to go on from there. Until we have accepted it, forgiveness has really not taken place. Acceptance is one of the hardest parts of forgiveness.

2. The same is true for the second side of forgiveness and this second side is that of being able to forgive ourselves. This is sometimes the most difficult thing to do. And just as in our forgivness of others, we accept them as they are, so in order for us to be able to forgive ourselves, we have to accept ourselves as we are with our mistakes and shortcomings. This does not mean we condone them!

What is hard for us to understand at times is that we not only experience alienation in relation to others and to God, but also in relation to ourselves. All are bound up in one package. Thus we not only reject others, but we reject ourselves. "I do not feel that I am all that I was meant to be," is a comment often heard from people who are disappointed or disgusted with themselves and their behavior." Paul wrote of this long ago--"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

To be able to forgive ourselves is not something isolated, but is always related to others forgiving us and to the fact of accepting and receiving the forgiveness of God.

The story is told of a young man whose life was blighted by the memory of his part in a college escapade that resulted in the death of one of his classmates. He floundered from one job to another. He and his wife separated after 6 years of marriage. Then something happened to change this man's life. His wife came back as a result and he earned a fine position. What happened? What caused the change?

He explained it this way! "I used to think nothing can undo what I've done. The thought of my guilt would stop

me in the middle of s smile or handshake. It put a wall between my wife and me and between myself and others. Then I had an unexpected visit from the person I dreaded most to see--the mother of the college classmate who died."

"Years ago," she said, "I found it in my heart, through prayer, to forgive you. Your wife forgave you. So did your friends and employers." She paused and then said sternly, "You are the only person who hasn't forgiven yourself. Who do you think you are to stand out against the people who are your friends and God almight?"

The man said that he looked into her eyes and found there a kind of forgiveness and permission to be the person he might've been if her son had lived. For the first time in his life he felt worthy to love and be loved. He was able to forgive himself by truly accepting the forgiveness of others and of God. This is what countless persons must've experiences as they met Jesus and looked into his eyes and felt his touch--you're sins are forgiven!" Therein lies the good news of the gospel -- that God has forgiven us and continues to do so. But we are never going to believe that God forgives us unless we also experience the forgiveness of others and forgive ourselves.

All of this is not to say that forgiveness is easy or that it doesn't cost us something. To overcome a separation between people is difficult and something has to give.

Thus it has always been that the deepest significance of religion has to do with our attempt through rites, ceremonies, feasts, fasts and the meeting of ethical demand, to mend the break between ourselves and God and through Him to mend the break between persons.

Children's behavior is often revealing at this point. If a child feels separated from the parent because of something he has done or something that makes him feel unacceptable, the child feels that he must do something to restore himself to union with the parent. He may come in bringing mother a gift by which he hopes to restore the relationship and the gift is also a symbol that he really seeks forgiveness. Or he may say-- "Mother, I'm sorry I was bad, from now on I'll be good."

He hopes that on the basis of the promise of future goodness, the mother will forgive and take him back into a warm, loving relationship. Actually, much of our behavior as children and adults has to do with our attempts to achieve a reunion of the brokenness in our lives.

3. God continually forgives us!

The whole story of the Christian faith, of God coming to persons in the person of Jesus Christ, is the story of God coming to heal and restore the brokenness between person and person and between us and God. As Jesus lived with people, they were powerfully drawn to him. And as they were drawn to him, they were drawn to one another. Here was a new kind of relationship, something they had not known before. They found the power to forgive. They could give up their pride and accept forgiveness.

This power to forgive and be forgiven is still present today. It's to be part of the behavior of Christians because God continually accepts and forgives us.

Evidence of this power of healing and restoration and forgiveness was dramatically shown in a case which drew nation-wide publicity a few years ago.

A Korean student, studying in this country in Philadelphia, was wantonly attacked and killed one night by a gang of boys. He was a new Christian as were his parents and relatives in Korea. His entire family in Korea, upon hearing of his death and the circumstances, wrote a letter of forgiveness and healing that became famous.

After expressing their appreciation for the sympathy extended to them, the family went on to say that they were not only said because of their son's death but also because of the unsaved souls of the members of the gang who had killed him. They said they hoped they might be instrumental in helping the members of the gang. Our whole family has met together and we have decided to petition that the most generous treatment possible within the laws of your government be given to those who have committed this criminal action. . . .and in order to give evidence of our sincere hope contained in this petition our whole family has decided to save money to start a fund to be used for the religious, educational, vocational and social guidance of the boys when they are released. In addition, we are daring to hope that we can do something

to minimize such juvenile criminal actions which are to be found not only in your country, but also in Korea, and we are sure everywhere in the world. We think this is a way to give life to the dead, and to the murderers, and to keep you and us closer in Christian love and fellowship. We have dared to express our hope with a spirit received from the gospel of our Saviour Jesus Christ who died for our sins. May God bless you, your people and particularly the boys who killed our son and kinsman.

The letter was signed by the father and mother, two uncles, two aunts, five sisters, two brothers and nine cousins.

Seventy times Seven! Forgiveness is to be unending. It's a miracle we can all participate in each day. Forgive someone this day or this week.