Sunday, February 5, 1984
WHY NOT FORGIVE?
Matthew 18:21-22; Luke 23:32-34

The cover of the January 9, 1984, edition of Time magazine had on it a picture of Pope John Paul II clasping the hand of the man who had tried to kill him. It was the same hand that had held the gun on May 13, 1981. Also, on the cover of that issues of Time magazine were the words printed in bold type, "Why Forgive?" and the "cover story" was on the subject of forgiveness.

What prompted the story in the magazine was the visit of the pope to the prison cell of his would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca. According to news reports, for 21 minutes the pope sat with the man who tried to kill him, held his hand, and the two talked softly together. In that conversation, the pope personally forgave him for the shooting. It was a startling drama or forgiveness and reconciliation.

As Time magazine pointed out, the meaning of John Paul's forgiveness was profoundly Christian. He embraced his enemy and forgave him. In fact, all during the past year, the 1,950th anniversary of Christ's death, John Paul has preached the theme of reconciliation. In one of his sermons he said, "Violence is evil. Violence is unacceptable as a solution to problems. Violence in unworthy of human beings. Violence is a lie, for it goes against the truth of our faith, the truth of our humanity."

This morning let's look once again at forgiveness and ask, "Why not forgive?" Because there is so much violence, so much hurt in human life, so many grudges, so much resentment between human beings, so many feuds, forgiveness is an issue that must be looked at again and again. And those of us who call ourselves Christians need to remember that forgiveness is at the center of our faith.

Not all stories of forgiveness or lack of it make the headlines, but almost every day there is some kind of story about it. Last week, for example, I came across a story in the daily paper about two brothers, Clarence and Charles Atton, who had feuded bitterly for 25 years. They scarcely spoke and wouldn't even enter a hospital room together as their mother lay dying.

The story noted that the feud ended this week, but not with forgiveness. It ended when both brothers died — at the same hospital, less than two hours apart, both of cardiac arrest. Clarence was 61. Charles was 56.

Their wives told the Boston Globe that Charles, known as "Buddy," and Clarence, known as "Lance," grew up in a large family in Somerville, a blue-collar city just west of Boston. They lived within 20 miles of each other in the Boston area the rest of their lives. But a quarter century ago, when both men were in their 20s, something came between them. The survivors were reluctant to explain the source of the feud. Maureen Atton, Lance's wife, said, "It was so personal — it had to do with our children — and it was so difficult to overcome."

In the last 10 years, according to their wives, the brothers spoke only twice: once when their mother died and again when a sister died.

The sad part about such feuds is that they always affect many others in addition to the two who would not forgive. One of the brothers had seven children; the other had three. The stress

of that unending feud had to affect all of them, in addition to the two wives. Why not forgive? What was gained by continuing the feud? Nothing was gained, but a lot was lost.

Last week a letter to Ann Landers illustrated the pain of being unforgiving and how that pain spreads to others. A mother wrote: “Dear Ann Landers: ten years ago, my son stopped talking to my daughter. She did something he did not approve of. Both were adults at the time. She was unaware of what caused his anger because he wouldn’t discuss it.

“Aside from refusing to speak to her, he avoided family functions to which she had been invited. If she happened to drop in to visit a relative and he was present, he would leave immediately, making no effort to mask his reason for the hasty departure. He went so far as to change churches to avoid running in to her. Since the estrangement, our family has been unable to get together for birthdays, anniversaries, or holidays.

“Two years ago, my daughter decided she had had enough of her brother’s hateful treatment and decided to confront him. She wanted to know exactly why he was so furious with her, hoping to talk it out and reconcile. He flew into a rage, curses, carried on like a maniac, and ran out of the house, slamming the door behind him.

“We recently learned our daughter has a terminal illness. The doctors give her three months at the most. When her brother heard the news, he went immediately to his sister’s home, apologized for his unspeakable behavior, and begged to be forgiven. She told him his friendship would have meant a great feal to her during the past 10 years, but she does not want him to make amends because he pities her. She flatly refused to accept his apologies and asked that he not hang around during the last days of her life. The family feels she should forgive him, or he will be tortured by guilt forever. Please struggle with this one and give us your answer, Ann.”

Ann’s answer was: “Dear Mother: It was no struggle. I have always come down on the side of forgiveness and recommend it for everybody. I hope your daughter will forgive her brothers, not only for his sake, but for hers — and the other members of the family.”

Unforgiveness is a tragedy. Peter asked Jesus, “How often shall someone wrong me and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus replied, “I do not say to you seven times, but 70 times seven.” How, then, can we become more forgiving persons?

1. First of all, let us admit that forgiveness is not always easy, either to give or receive. It is difficult because, when we are hurt by someone, our initial response is to want to retaliate, to return hurt for hurt. Thus, we might say, “I’ll never forgive him or her.” It can be our way of wanting to punish the other person for hurting us. We want to make the person suffer by our withholding of our forgiveness. Or we want to wait until the person is properly repentant.

Pope John Paul said, however, that he had forgiven his would-be assassin immediately after the shooting. He didn’t wait for repentance. The visit to the prison months later was arranged so he could tell him personally that he was forgiven.

He was following the example of Jesus, who, while dying on the cross, forgave those who had crucified him, even though for the most part at that time they were unrepentant and probably thought they were doing a good deed by getting a troublemaker out of the way.

On the other hand, just as forgiveness is not easy to give, neither is it easy to receive. If I hurt someone and that person forgives me, for me to receive it means that I need to admit to myself and others and I did wrong and need to be forgiven. And that's not always easy to do. Our tendency to self-righteousness can keep us from that admission. Repentance is a pre-condition for receiving forgiveness.

2. Secondly, it will help us to be more forgiving persons if we realize that to forgive does not mean that we condone what has been done. When the pope forgave his would-be assassin, he was not thereby saying that attempted murder is OK. The pope forgave Agca, but Agca remains in jail. Forgiveness does not override justice.

In public realms there is very often a tension between justice and forgiveness. And there is often a difference between personal forgiveness and legal or social forgiveness. Personal relationships can be very spontaneous, almost oblivious to rules, to laws and orders, but society cannot be.

3. Thirdly, it will help us to be more forgiving if we remember that to be forgiving does not imply weakness on our part, but rather strength. As Time magazine pointed out in its article, "Where ethnic identity remains strong and is fiercely perpetuated, the logic of the blood feud reigns, and it is infinitely harder to forgive or even think of forgiveness." Any wrong against anyone in the family or tribe is remembered, and for an individual to forgive his or her enemy would mean betraying the whole tribe or the family and its ancestors, dishonoring the sacrifices that they had made. Not only is it considered weakness to forgive, but treason, and furthermore, inexcusable to forget.

So it is that between Armenians and Turks, Northern Irish Catholics and Protestants, between Lebanese Maronites and Druze, between Hatfields and McCoys, between Palestinians and Jews, the ancient fury persists. The enemy is timeless. The enemy's very existence is unforgiveable.

Last week when the chancellor of West Germany visited the country of Israel, there were demonstration with the message that he should not have been permitted to enter the country because of what Hitler and the Nazi movement had done to the Jews in the 1930s and 1940s, even though the present chancellor was a child in Germany when that was going on. I'm personally glad the chancellor made the trip and glad that the official government of Israel received him. Such moves are necessary in our kind of world if there is ever to be peace. When Menachem Begin of Israel and Egyptian president Anwar Sadat met face to face in 1977 and when Anwar Sadat made his dramatic journey to Jerusalem in that same year, it began the process of healing between those two countries.

We need more moves of that kind across the lines of historical hatred. Forgiveness is not a sign of weakness, but of strength.

Unfortunately, in our time we are experiencing again a fracturing of society, where people are gathering into groups again — tribal, racial, linguistic, religious, political, national. It is a clustering into separateness that will, it is thought, improve, assure, or extend each group's power or place, or keep it safe or safer from the power, threat, or hostility of others. But such fragmentation does not open people up to be more tolerant and forgiving; instead, it closes them in upon themselves and promotes the logic of revenge. Almost always, enormous slaughter is the result.

But forgiveness can take place, even on a large scale, and, when it does, it is good for everyone. For example, all over this country since the end of the Civil War, forgiveness has been at work. Black people in particular have had the grace to be forgiving. Dr. Donald Shriver, president of Union Seminary and a man who grew up in the South, said recently, “I think the decision by descendants of black slaves in this country to become citizens and active members of this society is a remarkable case of forgiveness. By and large, blacks have had a steadier sense of belonging to the United States and of being true citizens than many of those who have oppressed them.” Atlanta mayor Andrew Young said, “We shared the burden of guilt for past racial abuses, and we moved toward reconciliation. And we’ve grown together as brothers and sisters, and we’ve prospered, mainly because of the ability to forgive and be reconciled.”

I repeat, forgiveness is not a sign of weakness, but of strength. The giving and receiving of forgiveness are at the center of our faith. We are to be forgiving because God continually forgives us. Forgiveness is a profound transaction, and it is the working model of the human relationship with God. Forgiveness makes change possible, while to be unforgiving freezes the past and the present.

When we are forgiving, it shows that we believe that human beings can turn from evil to good. Those who do not forgive are those who are least capable of changing the circumstances of their lives. It is the implacable, retributive tribes, like those of Northern Ireland or Lebanon, who find themselves backwatered, isolated, perishing in their own fury.

Not to forgive is to be imprisoned by the past, by old grievances that do not permit life to proceed with new business. Not to forgive is to yield oneself to another’s control. Not to forgive is to be locked into a sequence of act and response, of outrage and revenge. Forgiveness, on the other hand, frees the forgiver.

Forgiveness can bring about miracles. It’s a miracle each one of us can participate in. Forgiveness is an absolute necessity if we are to live in peace.