Sunday, September 16, 1990
THE MIRACLE OF FORGIVENESS
Matthew 18:21-35

Today, among those of you who are present here, I'm looking for someone — a very unique person. I watched carefully as you were entering the building, but I couldn't find the person I'm looking for. Maybe that individual is listening on the radio or watching this program on television. If so, I hope you will write or call me and identify yourself.

The person I'm searching for is that rare individual who is not carrying a hurt or a grudge or any kind of resentment whatsoever because someone has hurt you either recently or in the past, and even though the wound was very deep and very painful, you were able to simply shrug it off, forget it, and put it aside.

Perhaps such individuals exist — I hope so. But for the rest of you, if you are like most of us, when somebody hurts you, maybe yesterday, maybe a lifetime ago, you cannot forget it quite that easily. You did not deserve the hurt. It went deep, deep enough to lodge itself in your memory. And if it's a deep enough hurt, you want revenge.

You are not alone. We all muddle our way through a world where even well-meaning people hurt each other. When we invest ourselves in deep personal relationships, we open ourselves to betrayal, disloyalty, and pain.

There are some hurts that we all can and should ignore. There are petty annoyances that irritate us, little slights when someone forgets to speak to us, or does not remember our birthday or anniversary, or is cross with us because of their own troubles or pains.

Today, however, we are talking about those deep hurts that we have not been able to ignore or forget — those which sit within us and sap our energy. These usually have at least three dimensions — they are personal, unfair (that is undeserved), and deep. When you feel this kind of three-dimensional pain, you have a wound that can be healed only by forgiving the one who wounded you.

There are other kinds of undeserved hurts that come our way where it is difficult to talk about forgiveness. For example, sometimes the pain comes from what nature fails to give us — some people, through no fault of their own, are born into the world with less health, less intelligence than they want. There are times too when we are literally almost destroyed by the forces of nature. Here is a family that had their baby killed by a tornado that ripped through their home with no advance warning. Their pain is so deep that it's almost impossible to bear. Who is there to forgive? No one of us is immune from being the random victim of natural forces that can smash us without respect for merit or need.

I don't think it's possible to forgive systems. We all know that systems can hurt and even destroy people. Economic systems can lock poor people into ghettos of brutal poverty. Political systems can turn people into slaves. Corporate systems can push people around like puppets and toss them aside like trash. All we can do with systems that hurt us is to do our best to change them so that they serve people instead of people serving them.

We have to acknowledge, too, that sometimes there are some things that are done to us by others that seem almost, if not, impossible to forgive.

Here is one woman's story. Some men she never saw and whose names she never knew did something so terrible to her that it changed her life forever. She was an Armenian woman. A gang invaded her home one night in Tehran and slaughtered everyone in her family. She had grown up in Iran, early in the century, moderately upper-class. One night, five terrorist Turks with hoods over their heads came to her house and tied up her husband, her two children, her father, and her mother, dragged them out of the house and outside the city, and butchered them all. She lived only because, unlike most other nights, she was away on an errand for the prep school where she taught Iranian children.

She asked, "How can I forgive people who have no faces, no names, no numbers, but were real enough to murder my family?" Her problem was not only the enormity of the crime but also the faceless anonymity of those who did the killing. Is it possible to forgive the invisible people, the ones whose faces you cannot see, but who do you terrible wrong?

We have to admit that in this whole matter of forgiveness it is hard to forgive people we cannot see, or touch, or maybe even know.

It is also hard to forgive people who do not care whether we forgive them or not.

It is hard to forgive some people because they seem too evil to be forgiven.

Sometimes the hardest person of all to forgive is oneself. I once knew a man who one day backed out of his garage with his car and, since he was in a hurry, did not look carefully behind the car to see what was in the driveway and ran over his own two-year-old daughter and killed her. Will he ever be able to forgive himself? I hope so, but it won't be easy. Sometime in the near future I'm going to deal with the important subject of forgiving oneself in a separate sermon because it needs that kind of attention.

In this sermon, we are looking at those personal acts of forgiveness between one person and another, and then especially at what being a forgiving person can and will do for you and for others.

One day when Jesus had been talking with his disciples and teaching them about forgiveness, the disciple named Peter asked Jesus a question that was on everyone's mind and is probably on your mind as well—"Teacher, how many times if someone does me wrong and hurts me am I to forgive that person? As many as seven times?" And to Peter, that sounded excessive. Jesus answered, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven." In other words, there is ideally to be no limit to how many times you forgive someone. It's not a matter of keeping score.

What then are some of the reasons as to why we should be forgiving of others? What are some of the benefits to us and for others? In what ways does forgiveness bring about miracles?

First of all, it is beneficial to us to be forgiving because it frees our own soul that will otherwise be blocked. When we forgive someone it is not only for their sake but also for our own sake. To continue to carry and nurture resentment accomplishes nothing for anyone. Comedian Buddy Hackett once said about nurturing resentment that while you're home sulking, they're out dancing.

You've had that experience. When you say, "Maybe I'll forgive, but I'll never forget," you mistakenly believe that resentment and continually reminding yourself of how you've been hurt is also hurting the other person, when generally speaking it is only devouring you.

When the poet Edwin Markham reached the age of retirement, he discovered that his banker had defrauded him. Markham was ready to retire but was penniless. He was also bitter. He was so bitter that he could no longer write poetry. He was obsessed with the evil perpetrated against him by a man he had thought was a friend.

One day he was sitting at his desk doodling, not writing poetry but only thinking of the man who had wronged him. Suddenly he felt God's holy spirit speaking to him, and the message was, "Markham, if you do not deal with this thing, it is going to ruin you. You cannot afford the price you are paying. You must forgive that man." Markham began at that moment to pray, "Lord, I will, and I do freely forgive." A miracle occurred. The resentment was gone. The poetry now flowed. He then wrote one of his most famous poems:

He drew a circle that shut me out —
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout:
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!

Markham learned what Jesus knew and taught — to continue to carry a load of guilt and resentment is to carry a heavy load and it takes much of the energy we could be using for better things. Not only does it cost us in terms of energy, but there's a cost in terms of our relationships.

In my first parish, I remember calling on an older woman who had experienced many hardships in her life; many more than anyone deserved. The trouble was that she could never forget her hardships, nor forgive those who had wronged her. Whenever I called on her, she would tell me again how unfairly she had been treated in her life. She was what a friend of mine called historical. You heard right, historical, not hysterical. She was caught up in her own history.

Over the years, she had become a very bitter person and as a consequence drove her family and former friends away from her. I have to admit it was very hard for me to continue to visit her. No one wanted to be around her and she died alone. Such is the cost of being an unforgiving person. When you release the wrongdoer from the wrong, you cut a malignant tumor out of your inner life.

Secondly, to forgive seventy times seven as Jesus asks us to do not only sweetens your own life and lightens your burden, but also helps to break the chain reaction of evil, bitterness, and retaliation. The problem with revenge is that it never gets what it wants; it never evens the score. Fairness never comes. The chain reaction set off by every act of vengeance always takes its unhindered course. It ties both the injured and the injurer to an escalator of pain. That's why family feuds, for example, go on and on until everyone is dead, or gets too old or too tired to fight. We are never so free as when we reach back into our past and forgive a person who caused us pain.
One woman put it this way: "Forgiving is love's revolution against life's unfairness. When we forgive, we ignore the normal impulses that lead us to want to get even and, with the miracle of love, we release ourselves from our own painful pasts."

Personally, I believe it is only God's love working through us that gives us the power to truly forgive. We do not have that power on our own.

Corrie Ten Boom was liberated from a Nazi concentration camp a few days after the Allies conquered Germany. It took longer to be liberated from her simmering hate. But she set out on the forgiving journey through her remembered pain and kept traveling until she arrived at the place where she forgave even the Nazis who had dehumanized her life in the camps.

In forgiving, she believed she had discovered the only power that could heal the history of hurt and hate and break the chain reaction of retaliation and evil. But forgiveness is not easy and it takes God's power to help us.

One day when she was preaching in Germany, after the service a man walked over to her and reached out his hand, expecting her to take it. "Ja, Fraulein Ten Boom, I am so glad that Jesus forgives us all of our sin, just as you say."

Corrie knew him. She remembered how she was forced to take showers with other women prisoners while this man looked on in a leering, mocking manner. Corrie remembered. He put his hand close to her. Her own hand froze at her side. She could not forgive. She was stunned and terrified by her own weakness. What could she do, she who had been so sure that she had overcome the deep hurt and the desperate hate and had arrived at forgiving? What could she do now that she was confronted by a man she could not forgive?

She prayed, "Jesus, I can't forgive this man. Forgive me." At once, in some wonderful ways she was not prepared for, she felt forgiving. Forgiven for not forgiving.

At that moment, she also felt the power to take the hand of her enemy and she did. In her heart, with the power of God's love working through her, she freed him from his terrible past and she freed herself from hers. The miracle of forgiveness.

Thirdly, God's forgiveness, which is always ready and waiting even before we ask, is what gives us the power to forgive others. Sometimes it happens the other way around — in the process of forgiving others, we begin to experience God's forgiveness. Many times it's not possible to determine which comes first because they are so intimately connected. That's why Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."
When you forgive a person who has hurt you deeply and unfairly, you perform a miracle with the help of God that has no equal. When you forgive, you walk with God and you heal the hurt you never deserved. Amen.