Sunday, September 15, 1996
SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN
Matthew 18:21-35

I said in last week's sermon that the Christian faith can be described in a number of ways — in terms of its history, its organization, its doctrines, its ethical principles — but it can best be defined as a way of looking at things. Or, to be more accurate, for most of us, it is a new way of looking at things, a way of seeing that is often contrary to the world's perspective.

The Christian faith, as lived and taught by Jesus, involves a changed point of view, a new way of seeing and understanding God, God's creation, ourselves, and others. When people came into contact with Jesus and decided to follow him, he helped them change their way of looking at things.

A new way of looking at things — that's the central issue in the story from Matthew's Gospel read earlier. In the story, Jesus gave Peter and the disciples, and he gives us, a new way of looking at forgiveness — why we need to forgive, and what it does for us and others.

One day, Peter asked Jesus, "Teacher, if someone sins against me, if someone wrongs me again and again, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus answered, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times." Another translation says seventy times seven, which multiplied is 490 times. In the Old Testament, the rule was to forgive people three times. So here's a whole new way of looking at forgiveness. Instead of wanting revenge, instead of holding a grudge and letting resentment poison you, forgive one another.

Let's begin by admitting that one of the most difficult tasks for us as human beings is to forgive someone. Family feuds, ethnic conflicts, and ancient rivalries, which result in violence and war, all illustrate the difficulty of forgiveness.

Here's 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 and was moderately upper-class.

One night, five terrorists 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, took them outside the city, and butchered them all. She survived only because, unlike most nights, she was away on an errand for the 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?"

We have to admit that in this whole matter of forgiveness, it is hard to forgive people we cannot see, touch, or even know. It is also difficult to forgive people who do not care whether we forgive them or not. It is difficult to forgive people who seem too evil to be forgiven.

I wonder how many of you here today, or those listening on the radio or watching on television, are carrying a hurt, a resentment, or a grudge against someone who has hurt you or someone you love? This hurt could have happened recently or in the past, and you've found it difficult to forgive that person, or maybe a group of people. The hurt went deep, deep enough to lodge

itself in your memory, and if it's deep enough, you want revenge. Is there someone in your life you need to forgive?

Clarence and Charles Atton were brothers who refused to forgive one another for more than 25 years. They wouldn't speak to each other, much less allow their family members to visit with one another. They wouldn't even enter a hospital room together as their mother lay dying.

The feud finally ended, 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 said that the two brothers grew up in a large family, and when both men were in their 20s, something came between them — some conflict over their children. These two men gained absolutely nothing from their unwillingness to forgive each other, except pain, grief, and maybe early death.

The sad part about such feuds is that they always affect many others adversely in addition to the two who would not forgive.

As I was preparing this sermon on forgiveness, I found in my "forgiveness" file the cover story from Time Magazine, dated January 9, 1984. The picture on the cover was that of Pope John Paul II, grasping the hand of the man who had tried to kill him — the same hand that held the gun on May 13, 1981. Also on the cover were the words printed in bold type, "WHY FORGIVE?"

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 the story, 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 trying to kill him.

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

As Time Magazine pointed out, the meaning of John Paul's forgiveness was profoundly Christian. That's because, according to Jesus, we are to have a new way of looking at forgiveness.

In this sermon, I'm talking primarily about one person forgiving another. I'm also talking about "undeserved forgiveness." The man who tried to kill Pope John Paul II did not deserve forgiveness. In the closing prayer of each marriage service we do in this church, the words of the prayer say, "Teach them the patience of undeserved forgiveness that they may live together in peace and in joy."

The Christian view of forgiveness is that it is not something you earn or deserve. It is a gift. Forgiveness is a part of practicing unconditional love.

It is to be seen in the context of God's forgiveness. We never earn God's forgiveness. It is simply there for us to receive. We forgive because God forgives us — continually, seventy times seven. In fact, according to the prayer which Jesus taught us and which we pray regularly, we say, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," or a better translation, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

What's the prayer implying? We cannot receive God's forgiveness until we forgive those who have wronged us. That doesn't mean we are earning God's forgiveness. By having an unforgiving attitude, we block out God's forgiveness. It's there, waiting, but we cannot receive it.

That's why Jesus said in another place, "If you come to worship God in a temple or in a church and you have a grudge against someone; leave your gift at the altar and go first and forgive that person, and then you can worship God." It's difficult to be in a relationship with God when you are filled with resentment or hate.

What then are some of the reasons why those of us who claim to be Christian are asked to forgive others even though they might not ask for forgiveness or deserve it?

First of all, we forgive others because of what it does for our own soul. It cleanses us. Forgiveness is not only for their sake but for our sake. As mentioned earlier, continuing to carry resentment accomplishes nothing for anyone. Comedian Buddy Hackett once said about nurturing resentment that while you're home sulking, they're out dancing.

When you say, "Maybe I'll forgive, but I'll never forget," you mistakenly believe that your resentment and continually reminding yourself of how you've been hurt is also hurting the other person when what it's doing is 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 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 took place. The resentment was gone. The poetry now began to flow. 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 experienced what Jesus taught and lived — continuing to carry a load of resentment and unforgiveness is a heavy burden, 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 relationships with other people and with God.

Secondly, when we begin to practice undeserved forgiveness, we help break the chain of evil, bitterness, and retaliation. The problem with seeking revenge instead of being forgiving is that it never evens the score. Fairness never comes. The chain reaction set off by every act of revenge always takes its unhindered course. It ties both the injured and the injurer to an escalator of pain. That's why family feuds go on until everyone is dead. We are never so free as when we reach back into our past and forgive a person who has 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 painful pasts.”

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.

One day, 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 had been so sure that she had overcome the deep hurt and desperate hate and had arrived at forgiving. What could she do now that she was confronted by the man she could not forgive?

She prayed, “Jesus, I can’t forgive this man, forgive me.” Then in some wonderful way she was not prepared for, she felt the forgiving love of God, and that she was forgiven for not being able to forgive.

At that moment, she also felt the power to take the hand of her enemy, and she did. She described it later as the power of God’s love working through her, which gave her the power to forgive, and she felt free for the first time since she had been liberated from the camp.

This leads to the third point: God’s loving forgiveness 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. It is not always possible, nor is it necessary, to determine which comes first because they are so intimately connected. Forgiveness brings about miracles. It’s a miracle in which each one of us can participate. Forgiveness is an absolute necessity if we are to live in peace. Today, forgive someone. Amen.