Sunday, September 15, 2002
WHO'S COUNTING?
Matthew 18:21-35

One of my favorite quotations is a saying attributed to Albert Einstein: "Not everything that counts can be counted. Not everything that can be counted, counts." This is important not only for statisticians to remember but for all of us. Someone else said, "Figures lie and liars figure." Statisticians know that data sometimes hide as much as they reveal.

In the history of the human race, exactly when human beings learned to count, I do not know. But I do know that the Arabs devised the wonderful numbering system using the numbers one through nine, plus zero, and a combination of those numbers, which is used throughout the world and which makes counting easier — and I am grateful for that.

I also know that we human beings are creatures who can easily become addicted to counting. The problem is, as Einstein pointed out, we then take the next step and give excessive value to what the numbers seem to indicate. For example, the pollsters tell us that 90 or more percent of people who live in the United States say they believe in God. That sounds good on the surface. But when I hear that statistic, my immediate response is, "So what?" As you've heard me say before, that's a meaningless percentage number unless you ask the follow-up question: "What kind of God do you believe in?" Even more detailed follow-up questions are needed if the percentage number is to have any real value. You also need to ask, "How has your belief in God changed the way you live? Do you now do more good than evil? Or do you do evil in the name of good?"

Personally, I believe there are too many polls on too many subjects and that many polls do nothing more than create a brief news story on the results of the poll. So we have news media commissioning polls so that they have a story on the outcome of the polls.

What has become even more popular is for radio or television stations to pose a question and then ask listeners or viewers to call in and give their "yes" or "no" response. Then the station reports the result, and again it's meaningless chatter.

It's so easy to become addicted to counting. According to Matthew's gospel, one day the disciple named Peter asked Jesus, "Teacher, if someone sins against me, how many times shall I forgive? As many as seven times?" Peter thought that was even excessive.

Jesus answered, "Not seven times, but I tell you seventy-seven times." Other translations say, "Seventy times seven," which multiplied is 490 times. In the Old Testament, the rule was to forgive another person three times. When Jesus said, "Seventy-seven times," or "Seventy times seven," he was in effect saying, "Who's counting?" Forgiveness of another person is not a matter of keeping score. Or as Einstein said, "Not everything that counts can be counted." In giving us the model prayer, which we call the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." In other words, in order to experience the forgiveness of God, you need to practice forgiveness in your own life, and it has nothing to do with counting.

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, and 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 an

alternative way of looking at things, a way that is often contrary to the world's way of looking at things.

I went on to say that the Christian way, as lived and taught by Jesus, involves a changed point of view — a different way of seeing and understanding God, God's creation, ourselves, and others. As today's Bible story from Matthew indicates, it's also an alternative way of understanding, receiving, and practicing forgiveness. Instead of wanting revenge, instead of holding a grudge and letting resentment poison you, you can be forgiving. And you are not to count the number of times you've forgiven someone and then say, "That's enough. I'm not going to forgive you ever again."

I think most of you would agree that one of the most difficult tasks for us as human beings is to forgive someone who has hurt us. Family feuds, ethnic conflicts, ancient rivalries that result in violence 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 is 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, tied up her husband, her two children, her father, and her mother, dragged them out of the house, took them outside the city, and killed them all. She survived only because, unlike every other night, 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?" In her case, she cannot forgive them because she doesn't know who they are. You have to admit that in this whole matter of forgiveness, it may not be possible to forgive people you cannot see or even know. Another kind of healing is called for in this type of circumstance. It is also difficult to forgive people who do not care whether you forgive them or not. It is difficult to forgive some people who seem too evil to be forgiven. Sometimes, it is necessary to forgive someone not because of what it will do for that person, but because of what it will do for you. More about that later.

I wonder how many of you present today in this worship service, or 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 taken place recently or in the past, and you have 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 a deep enough wound, you want revenge.

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

The feud finally ended, but not with forgiveness on their parts. 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 the two brothers grew up in a large family, and when both men were in their twenties, something came between them — some conflict over their children. The wives didn't even remember the details of the conflict. These two brothers gained

absolutely nothing from their unwillingness to forgive each other, except pain and 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. It was 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 had forgiven him.

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 different way of understanding forgiveness.

In this sermon, I'm talking primarily about one person forgiving another. I'm also talking about "undeserved forgiveness." In a strict legalistic sense, the man who tried to kill the Pope did not necessarily deserve forgiveness. He didn't ask for it. He may have even convinced himself that he didn't deserve it.

In the closing prayer of each marriage service we do in this church, the words of the prayer include this sentence: "Teach them the patience of undeserved forgiveness that they may live together in peace and joy."

The Christian understanding of forgiveness is that it is not something you earn or deserve. It is a gift. Forgiveness is part of practicing unconditional love. It is to be seen in the context of God's forgiveness. You do not need to earn God's forgiveness. It is simply there for you to receive. You are able to forgive because God forgives you, continually, seventy times seven — which means God doesn't count the number.

As I mentioned earlier, you are reminded in the Lord's Prayer to pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." What's the prayer implying? You cannot receive God's forgiveness, or even the forgiveness of others, until you are forgiving of those who have wronged you. It has nothing to do with earning forgiveness. If you have an unforgiving attitude, you block God's forgiveness and the forgiveness of others. It's there waiting, but you are not able to 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 forgive that person, and then you can worship God." It's difficult to be in a relationship with God and in a relationship with another person when you are filled with resentment or hate.

Here, then, are some of the benefits that come to you and to others from forgiveness.

First of all, when you are forgiving of others, you are the one who gains the most because of what it does for you. It cleanses you. It lightens your burdens. Forgiveness is not only for their sake, but for your sake. To continue to carry resentment or hate or both accomplishes nothing for anyone. Comedian Buddy Hackett once said about nurturing resentment, “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 the continual reminding of 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 he could no longer write poetry. He was obsessed with the evil perpetrated against him by a man he 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 what he could only describe as the Spirit of God 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 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: to continue to carry a load of resentment and to refuse forgiveness is to carry a heavy load that saps the energy you could be using for better things. Not only does it cost us in terms of energy, but it also affects our relationships with other people and with God.

Secondly, when you begin to practice undeserved forgiveness, you help to break the chain of evil, bitterness, and retaliation. The problem with seeking revenge instead of being forgiving is that it never evens the score. The chain reaction set off by every act of revenge always takes its unhindered course. It ties both parties to an escalator of pain.

Today, forgive someone, and don’t count how many times you’ve done it before. Amen.