Sunday, September 11, 2005
DON'T KEEP SCORE
Matthew 18:21-35

For some reason, and I don't know what that reason is, human beings seem to be addicted to counting and keeping score. It probably began thousands of years ago when people learned to count and numbering systems were invented. I do not mean to imply that all counting and score-keeping are bad. In the recent devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, it was necessary to count the number of people who had been killed and the number missing.

Most of the games you play would have no purpose if you did not keep score. I remember years ago when my wife and I took lessons in how to play bridge. Our instructor told us that it was important to keep score. He reminded us that the purpose of the game was to see who received the highest score.

Keeping score is necessary in playing games. But keeping score can be a big problem when you count and keep score in your human relationships. One of my favorite quotations is a statement attributed to 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.

Jesus had something to say about this business of score-keeping in human relationships. Keeping score and trying to get even — that's what enemies do, according to Jesus. He went on to say, "You know the system the world uses. It's all based on keeping score. If anyone injures you, you retaliate and injure that person in return — an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."

He knew that people also keep score in the positive relationships in life. Someone gives you a gift, you give one in return. You are invited to someone's home for dinner, and you reciprocate. Three times Jesus asks, "What credit is it to you if you love someone who loves you? If you do good to someone who does good to you?" His implied message is, "Why are you so intent on keeping score?"

It's amazing how many people keep score in human relationships, thinking in terms of "favor banks," where one person owes another and vice versa. People can tell when you're tallying up a total, and who likes that? The healthy alternative, of course, is recognizing that success is gained through giving without keeping score.

Here's what Jesus taught: "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you. Forgive. When someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other cheek. Do your good deeds in secret. Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." In other words, don't keep score.

It's so easy to become addicted to keeping score in human relationships. That's the main point in today's scripture reading from Matthew, chapter 18. Peter asked Jesus a "score-keeping" question. He knew that if he wanted to follow Jesus, forgiveness had to take the place of vengeance, but he still did not like the idea very much. He wanted to know how often he had to do it. He wanted a number to work with because forgiveness does not come naturally to human beings. So he asked, "If someone sins against me, how often should I forgive? As

many as seven times?" Jesus answered, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times." Jesus was saying that forgiveness is not a score-keeping activity.

Then, to underscore the importance of forgiveness, Jesus told Peter and all of his followers a story about a man who had been forgiven but then did not practice forgiveness in his own life. Jesus wanted Peter and everyone to know that there is an intrinsic relationship between your ability to forgive other people and your ability to experience God's forgiveness. This matter of forgiveness is of utmost and eternal importance.

Forgiveness can be difficult. Today marks four years since the events of 9/11. How do the words of Jesus on forgiveness fit into this event, especially if you had family members or friends who were injured or killed? Here's what one woman wrote: "I resolved that day that with God's help, I was not going to let the terrorists have still another victory. I was not going to let them implant a spirit of hatred and vindictiveness inside of me where the Spirit of God ought to be. I was not going to give up that territory to them. I felt a sense of spiritual freedom. Why should I allow them to determine how I was going to act?"

Forgiveness is more than an act of will. It is a function of grace. You cannot make yourself forgive. But you can remember the connection between your own dependence on God's acceptance of you — with all your mistakes and inadequacies — and your reaction to those who have hurt you. And if you cannot forgive, you can pray that the time will come when you can forgive. Even if you cannot pray that prayer, you can be honest before God in confessing that you cannot. God can take it.

Some things cannot be done by simply deciding. You have to wait. You have to open yourself to receive from another realm that which you find humanly impossible to do on your own. And if you cannot receive the gift of finally being able to forgive someone who has done you harm, a spouse who betrayed you, a parent who abused you, or a careless driver who killed someone you loved, you need to remember that to forgive is not to forget. It will not remove all the pain of the wrong. To forgive is not to excuse that which is unjust or cruel.

According to Jesus, to forgive is to make a conscious choice not to be held captive by that which is evil. Think of it this way: when someone does something evil to you, the first injury is their fault. But if you hold onto a feeling of vengeance and hatred, then you are injured a second time, and now the fault is yours.

I wonder how many of you who are present today in this worship service or who are listening on the radio are harboring 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.

Here's the important factor about forgiveness according to the teachings of Jesus: forgiveness is not something you earn or deserve. True forgiveness is a gift. It is an integral part of unconditional love. You always have to see it in the context of God's unconditional love and forgiveness. It is simply there for you to receive, continually, seventy times seven. God doesn't keep score.

Forgiveness is at the center of the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." The prayer implies that you will not be able to experience 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 for you, but you are not able to receive it.

That's why Jesus said in another place, "If you are bringing your gift to the altar, and you remember that 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 with another person when you are filled with resentment and hate.

It's helpful to think of forgiveness in terms of its benefits to you and to others. First of all, when you are forgiving of others, whether or not they deserve it or accept it, you are the one who gains the most because of what it does for you. It cleanses you. It frees 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 is toxic. 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 how you've been hurt is also hurting the other person. Maybe, maybe not. What it is doing is devouring you.

Here's one of my favorite forgiveness stories. When the poet Edwin Markham reached the age of retirement, he discovered that his banker had defrauded him. He was ready to retire but was devastated to find himself penniless. He was so consumed with resentment and anger that he could no longer write poetry. He was obsessed with the evil perpetrated against him by a man he thought was his 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 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 is a heavy burden, and it takes much of the energy you could be using for better things. Not only does it cost you in terms of energy, but there is a cost in relationships with other people and with God.

Second, when you are forgiving, it is not only good for you, but it has larger social consequences. You are helping to break the chain of evil, bitterness, and retaliation that is widespread in this world. The problem with refusing to forgive is that it never evens the score. Fairness never takes place. The chain reaction set off by every act of revenge always takes its unhindered course. It ties you and the one on whom you take revenge to an escalator of pain. That's why most family feuds go on until everyone is dead. You are never so free as when you reach back into your past and forgive a person who has caused you pain.

Here's how one woman described it: "Forgiving is love's revolution against life's unfairness. When you forgive, you ignore the normal impulses that lead you to want to get even, and with the miracle of love, you release yourself from your painful past."

Third, God's loving forgiveness is what gives you the power to forgive others. Sometimes it happens the other way around. In the process of forgiving someone, you begin to experience God's forgiveness. It's not always possible, nor is it necessary, to determine which comes first because they are so closely connected.

Here's an ancient story about forgiveness. There was a man who had a bakery shop. He was known in his village for his self-righteousness. He was a very righteous man. His wife respected her husband, loved him too, as much as he would allow. But over time, her heart began to ache for something more than his righteousness. One day, the baker came home to find his wife in the arms of another man. All the village assumed that the righteous baker would throw her out on the street. But he said, "No, the Bible tells me not to do that. I will keep her at home."

Yet he could not forgive her in his heart for bringing shame on their family. As time passed, his anger grew and became bitter. After a while, this was noticed in the heavenly places, and every time he felt bitterness toward his wife, who had indeed betrayed the marriage vows, an angel would fly from heaven and deposit a tiny pebble in his heart, and he would feel a stab of pain. As the days passed, the pebbles multiplied until soon he was bent over with the weight of them. Then one night, the angel came to him and said, "You may be healed from all this, but the only way to do this is to discover the gift of new eyes. You are going to have to look at your wife not only as one who betrayed you, but as a flawed, needy, imperfect person whom you, with your own flaws and imperfections, have betrayed in more subtle ways."

"Nothing can change what she did," he protested. "You are right," the angel answered. "You cannot change the past, but you can heal the past." "How?" he asked. "Look with new eyes," the angel said.

So the baker tried to see his wife in a new way. Mysteriously, every time he tried, she became the woman who needed him and the one he needed. Then he saw himself as he really was, not a perfect fellow by any means. Day by day, the angel lifted the stones out of his heart. Together, the two of them began a journey into a new season of life, a journey of love, healing, and reconciliation.

Don't keep score. Forgiveness brings about miracles. Today, forgive someone.

Amen.