

September 11, 2011 / Will Cardwell

Forgiving from the Heart

Matthew 18:21-35, Romans 14:7-12

It is an honor to speak here today where so many amazing words have been spoken and so many wonderful people have expressed their faith in unique and beautiful ways. The Church of the Covenant is a dominating part of my life, especially since I retired almost three years ago. For Dolly and me, the history of this church is really a journey very personal to us, having met here and raised our children here. We have chosen to be members of this community continuously for our spiritual faith and practice for nearly all of the church's 55 years of existence. Lately I have enjoyed feeding my high tech appetite here and I thank you for accepting the good and bad of that. Along that line, let me plug our wonderful website “chcov.org” which Mike Hickcox built using his amazing gifts. But we all know so many unique and special gifts that each person in this community brings. It makes this church life-giving for me and I thank you -thank you all for being the gift that you are.

This is only my fourth time of preaching -so to speak- here in some 52 years of being a member. Just as with my last sermon in 1999, it was easy to accept the speaking challenge when I had recently had wonderful insights and inspiration in broad constructs. But when the time draws closer and I go to write it down, it doesn't sound so good. I want it to be worthy of your time and on a par with the amazing sermons brought every week, worthy to follow Bert and Sandy. And then there is David – an amazing sermon every

week! Surely if he can do that every week, I can crank out *one* sermon every 12 years. Some of you may know the feeling. What can I say that has not been said already in a much better way.

I chose the main scripture several weeks ago. It is from the Matthew reading in this week's lectionary dealing with forgiving, not 7 times but seventy-seven times. This is often translated “seventy time seven times” – unlimited forgiving from the heart. These are passages that Bert had referenced two weeks ago. In his sermon he said, “We must push ourselves to be more forgiving and more understanding”. Forgiveness seems to me to be -almost- the heart of the Gospel. Maybe “love” is more the heart of the Gospel. Forgiving is a special case of loving where there is a perceived offense to someone, and the response of the offended is agape' love. In the early days we used to glibly say: “Forget the rest, all you have to do is love”. Not too different from the Beatles who came along later and sang “All you *need* is love”. No matter how complex the human relations or political or theological issue, we would say in a facetious way, “If everybody loved each other, there would be no problems in the world. Wars? Just everybody love each other. Hunger? Famine? If all loved in the Gospel sense, all would see that others have what they need. Love underlies nearly everything spoken at this lectern. But we know we will never fully embody Christ's love. We know about its various forms like so called *tough* love. We know about “be angry but don't let the sun go down on your anger”. Jesus turned over the tables in the synagogue and he cursed a fig tree. Not all flower child type of love. Surely, we will always be growing in our knowledge and understanding of love.

But I'm focusing on forgiveness today. Here is its description from Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia: "Forgiveness is typically defined as the process of concluding resentment, indignation or anger as a result of a perceived offense, difference or mistake, or ceasing to demand punishment or restitution. The Oxford English Dictionary defines forgiveness as 'to grant free pardon and to give up all claim on account of an offense or debt'".

"Perceived" offense. I like that wording in the definition because it does not put the emphasis on blame. It implies that forgiveness doesn't depend on sorting out who's responsible for the perceived offense. By the way, forgiveness, as we know, includes forgiving one's self, sometimes the hardest one to forgive.

Dr Katherine Piderman, the staff Chaplain of the Mayo Clinic, writes this about forgiveness:

"Generally, forgiveness is a decision to let go of resentment and thoughts of revenge. The act that hurt or offended you may always remain a part of your life, but forgiveness can lessen its grip on you and help you focus on other, positive parts of your life. Forgiveness can even lead to feelings of understanding, empathy and compassion for the one who hurt you.

Forgiveness doesn't mean that you deny the other person's responsibility for hurting you, and it doesn't minimize or justify the wrong. You can forgive the person without excusing the act. Forgiveness brings a kind of peace that helps you go on with life."

Being on the Mayo Clinic staff, Dr. Piderman goes on to innumerate many

health benefits from the spiritual practice of forgiveness: healthier relationships, greater spiritual and psychological well-being, less stress and hostility, lower blood pressure, fewer symptoms of depression, anxiety and chronic pain and lower risk of alcohol and substance abuse.

I sympathize with the English romantic poet William Blake who said: “It is easier to forgive an enemy than to forgive a friend. In Matt 18:21 Peter asks: “If *another member of the church* sins against me, should I forgive seven times?” Matthew 18:35 says: “...forgive *your brother or sister* from your heart.” Not Osama bin Laden, who will be mentioned later, but “another member of the church” or “your brother or sister”. That includes bosses, colleagues and customers in my 48-year work career... people who were also friends. The day-in day-out people who don't approach things *my* way. So many opportunities to forgive the other and to forgive myself.

After instructing us to forgive not seven, but seventy-seven times, Jesus tells the story of the unrepentant servant. A king ordered his slave, who couldn't repay an enormous debt to the king, to be sold, together with the slave's wife, children and all possessions, in order to make payment. The slave begged his lord to have patience, saying he would repay everything. Out of pity, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But then that same slave, went out and demanded payment of a small amount owed him from a fellow slave. When his fellow slave pleaded with him to have patience with this small debt, the demanding slave refused and threw his fellow servant into prison until he would pay the debt. This action of the unforgiving slave was reported to the king who confronted him and had no mercy. In anger he “handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his

entire debt”

We don't have a recipe for all that this parable means and it has some troubling parts. We have to figure it out for ourselves. A colleague I worked with up until five years ago would say: “Oh, that's just something to figure out” when we were given a daunting complex assignment. David has figured out so many Bible stories for me in an amazing way week after week. He and I were both on vacation this week and we didn't discuss this week's scripture. I however found someone else who has figured out this parable. William C. Spohn, professor of religious studies at Santa Clara University, gave a speech at St. Mary's College in California in November of 2001 soon after the 9/11 attack. The speech was entitled “Osama bin Laden and the Duty to Forgive”. I quote him:

“God offers forgiveness freely, but we don't have to accept it. If we do accept it, it will carry over into our dealings with others. We will naturally be merciful. If we are brutal with them, that means God's forgiveness never entered into our identity in the first place. Being merciful, we will begin to comprehend who God is. Being brutal, we will construct a god who is as brutal as we are.”

Spohn helps me understand parts that had bothered me: “*The kingdom of heaven may be compared to*” this king who wished to settle accounts. The story ends with “*So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you (hand us over to be tortured?), if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart*”. I was helped by the fact that this parable doesn't occur anywhere else in the gospels and that collectively the parables involving the

brutal “servant - master” culture tend to be harsh and brutal - out of character with the unconditional love seen in the Prodigal Son and The Good Shepherd. Repeating Professor Spohn: “Being merciful, we will begin to comprehend who God is. Being brutal, we will construct a god who is as brutal as we are.”

Today is the 10th anniversary of the unbelievably terrible acts that bear the label of today's date 9/11. The first tower would have been hit less than three hours ago. Dr. Spohn says this:

“So the final challenge about bin Laden is not an abstract one. It is a challenge that we invite every time we say the Lord's Prayer, which contains the most dangerous line we could ever say: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" (Matthew 6:12). This is the only obligation we put on ourselves in that prayer. We are asking God to treat us in exactly the same way as we treat those who have wronged us. We are saying, "Be as close to me, God, as I am to the person most distant in my life." What a frightening thought.

Bert, in his sermon, gave a helpful focus: “I wonder if Osama bin Laden had been shown unconditional love in childhood, would I be telling this story today” - that is, would Bert be telling the story of the loss of his heroic friend and firefighter when the towers fell ten years ago. We have the chance to help prevent future tragedies by offering unconditional love today.

In the Romans 14 scripture we read: “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For

to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.” Today those of us who live remember and stand in awe of those who died so tragically ten years ago and we pray for their loved ones. But also we live to the Lord by inviting the living spirit of Christ into our lives that we, individually and as a community, become better channels of His unconditional love and honor those we remember on this day.