

SERMON TITLE – "Why Wouldn't I Forgive You?"

TEXT – Matthew 18:21-22

PREACHED AT – Neighbourhood Church

DATE – Aug. 17, 2008

Our summer sermon series has been focused on the Beatitudes—a passage of Scripture that contains probably the most focused presentation of Jesus' ethical teachings. James has walked us through a series of what, at first glance, appear to be highly counter-intuitive states to be described as "blessed." We've seen how it is the poor, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, the merciful, the meek, and (last week) those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness whom Jesus calls "blessed."

If I were to stand back and attempt to summarize what Jesus is after in the Beatitudes, it would seem to be something like:

"Blessed are you when you feel least blessed by the standards and operating assumptions of the world in which you live!"

Now of course Jesus isn't just equating blessing with misery! He is saying, however, that our understanding of "blessing" needs to be reoriented. Jesus' teaching is not for the faint of heart. It stands in direct opposition to the world's general operating principle, which seems to be "survival of the fittest," look out for number one, etc. In a sense, Jesus seems to be inverting this "wisdom" with something like "survival of the weakest!"

Of course, we know the end of the story—we know that the "weakness of God was and is stronger than the "strength" of the world—but Jesus' teaching still strikes us as bizarre, difficult, perhaps even naïve and idealistic in our fallen world.

Well, today, I want to take a one-week hiatus from the Beatitudes. We'll be returning to the two remaining ones – "blessed are the peacemakers" and "blessed are the pure in heart" in the coming weeks, but today I wanted to take a step back and address a kind of "big picture" theme which is implicit in all the Beatitudes and which is a central component of the Christian story. Today we're going to focus on another passage in Matthew—chapter 18:21-22. I want to talk about forgiveness.

The way I'm going to do this is to share a story.

Stories are important—perhaps even more important than we realize. A while back I came across an article claiming that scientists had 'discovered' that we humans are creatures who need to understand ourselves and our world as a part of a narrative—that we are happiest and healthiest when we understand ourselves as being a part of some kind of a story that is redemptive, that is will have a positive outcome. Stories are important.

The Bible itself comes to us in story form—the grand story of creation, fall, and redemption. Christians believe that the story of the Bible is *the* true story of the cosmos.

Jesus often taught in little stories (parables) because he knew that stories had a way of getting into our bones, into our very beings in a way that other forms of discourse did not.

We need good stories to be gospel people, and I was a part of such a story, albeit on a much smaller scale, a few weeks ago.

As anyone who's ever moved will know, trying to get settled in a new home in a new city can be a stressful time. There is lots of assembling things, moving them around, running around buying this or that miscellaneous item, returning said item when it doesn't fit or work as you expected it to, etc.

Several consecutive days of this can leave one feeling a bit tired and even a little short-tempered. When you combine parents who are preoccupied with setting up a house with kids who are getting less attention than they are normally accustomed to, you have a recipe for frustration.

Well, a couple of nights ago, at the end of a long day of setting-up-house, the kids and I decided to go for a bike ride to end the evening. They wanted to see their new school and I needed to get out of the house so we prepared to go.

Only it wasn't so simple. First a bike helmet couldn't be located, and we spent twenty minutes hunting around for it, with all of the drama and despair that can be produced in such situations.

Then, as we were about to embark, Nicky (with his brand new bike that we had obtained just prior to moving to Nanaimo) went flying down the mini-ditch by our driveway, crashed his front tire into a culvert, and flew awkwardly off his bike.

By this time I was becoming a fairly grouchy and impatient fellow.

My response to this completely ordinary occurrence in the life of a seven-year-old boy was to get angry at him for (I thought) wrecking his bike tire (turns out the bike tire was just fine), for imperiling himself, and, most importantly, for inconveniencing me.

To my shame, I got mad at an excited kid for a routine mishap where no one was hurt and nothing was damaged (except for any enthusiasm and good-will that happened to be lingering about).

So we departed for our bike ride a beleaguered and ill-tempered lot, off to enjoy some "quality" family time at the park. I think we must have been a sad sight indeed—two forlorn and defeated-looking children and an angry and flustered father riding along in virtual silence.

Well, about halfway up Dingle Bingle Hill Road (!) I realized that I had, of course, completely overreacted. I asked Nicky if he would forgive me for losing my temper. He nodded and I thanked him.

But then he said something that caught me off guard. After pausing and looking at me somewhat quizzically, he said “Why wouldn’t I forgive you dad? I always forgive you.”

“Why wouldn’t I forgive you?” This is an incredible question, when you stop to think about it, especially since more often than not the first question that pops into our head when we are wronged is the exact opposite one: “Why would or should I forgive you?”

We instinctively think that forgiveness requires justifying, as if the default position is holding on to the wrong and the pain it causes and using it as leverage for the future. We remember wrongs and we hold them against those who commit them. This protects us (we think) from future pain and seems a necessary strategy in a world where grace is so rare and self-preservation seems the name of the game.

The kind of people we are (sinners) and the kind of environment we live in (a world where injustice seems to flourish, if only temporarily) seems to require that forgiveness be carefully measured out, dispensed only when we can be certain that it will not bring us further pain. Forgiveness is certainly not something we can afford to promiscuously toss around whenever and wherever it is asked for.

In this context, “why wouldn’t I forgive you?” seems a question that is naive at best, suitable, perhaps, for children who are (mercifully) not yet fully aware with the harsh nature of reality, but an inadequate, possibly dangerous approach for those of us who know better

So is the kind of forgiveness Nicky was willing to extend to me just another crazy ideal?

Well, the Bible, obviously, has quite a lot to say about forgiveness. We could think of the familiar Old Testament stories—stories like Joseph forgiving his brothers after they had sold him into slavery in Egypt, or of David desperately seeking forgiveness after his affair with Bathsheba and murder of her husband.

But the theme of forgiveness is most prominent in the New Testament. Indeed, forgiveness simply *is* the good news of the gospel—we, who were enemies of God, lost in our sins and without hope are forgiven because of what God accomplished on the cross in Christ.

The good news of the gospel is that we do not get what we deserve. None of us.

Christ took the weight of sin and human evil upon himself and paid the penalty, opening the way toward forgiveness and reconciliation with wayward human beings.

In Matthew 26:28, in the upper room, in a familiar passage often quoted at the communion table, Jesus describes the purpose of what he was about to undergo:

*“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many **for the forgiveness of sins.**”*

The hard road that Jesus followed was for the purpose of forgiveness and reconciliation between a holy God and sinful human beings. Just before he breathed his last, those famous words came from his lips:

“Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34).

We humans have never really known what we are doing, have we? We mess things up spectacularly, sin repeatedly, and have trouble living with one another, overlooking each other’s faults (perceived or real). We are relationally dysfunctional, weak-willed, self-indulgent, and a whole host of other faults probably too numerous to mention.

And we hurt each other. Often. We need to be forgiven and we need to forgive. But how much? How often? And to what extent? Nicky’s question seemed to imply a virtually limitless forgiveness—a kind of instinctive reflexive response to just forgive no matter what. Is that what God expects of us?

Well, in this morning’s text, Matthew 18:21-22, we get a sense of what answers to these questions might look like:

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive someone who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

22 Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

The general consensus among Jewish rabbis at the time was that a member of the community must be forgiven three times, but on the fourth occasion, forgiveness was no longer necessary.

Peter undoubtedly thought that he was going well beyond the call of duty with the number seven. Not only was seven (obviously) more than three, it was and is a highly symbolic number in the Jewish imagination. Seven signified “completeness”—from the number of days it took God to create the world, the sevenfold vengeance on Cain (Gen 4:15), imagery from Revelation 1—and Peter was undoubtedly attempting to show how willing he was to go above and beyond the call of duty in forgiving his neighbour.

Jesus’ response must have blown Peter away. Just as Jesus’ descriptions of who is “blessed” in the Beatitudes leave us feeling a little unsettled, a little uncomfortable, a little bewildered, so here Jesus seems to be commanding a virtually impossible ideal. It’s as if he is saying that your forgiveness must be so complete, so limitless, so thorough, so open-ended, that only God himself would be capable of it.

Seventy times seven?!

But surely people will take advantage of me.

Seventy times seven.

But it could lead to my getting deeply hurt.

Seventy times seven.

But what about justice? My offender should get what they deserve!

Seventy times seven.

But you don't know how badly I've been hurt.

Seventy times seven.

But I can't do it!

Seventy times seven.

Jesus is clear. ***Our forgiveness cannot be limited by a number.*** The point is not that we should forgive 490X instead of 7. Jesus flatly resists our tendency to try to figure out exactly how much is required of us and then go no further.

In the passage immediately following this morning's text Jesus tells the parable of the unmerciful servant who refused to forgive despite having his own debt cancelled which makes clear that we who have been forgiven much, must forgive.

Why? Is this just an arbitrary command instituted to make us squirm and struggle? Obviously, the answer is no.

Those of who have been forgiven know very well the power of forgiveness. Forgiveness means hope for the hopeless, new life for the dead and the dying (spiritually, emotionally, or physically), new opportunity for the beaten down and defeated, judgment and the potential of reconciliation for the oppressor, and mercy for all of us who fit into any or all of these categories at various stages along our journeys. Forgiveness is the doorway for new possibilities of hope, harmony, goodness, *shalom*.

So, back to the story I began with. As the kids were playing at the park, and throughout the evening that followed, I found myself wondering what the world would look like if more of us operated with Nicky's question in our minds rather than the alternatives we acquire from the culture around us.

Would the world be a better or worse place if we were reckless rather than cautious forgivers?

Nicky's question is, fundamentally, a gospel question in that the attitude it reveals is good news for broken people who so frequently hurt and are hurt by others. It points to the basic gospel truth that God, in Christ, "recklessly" forgives human beings who alienate and distance themselves from him.

To people such as us—you and me!—God says "why wouldn't I forgive you?"

Grace, not a grudging tit-for-tat reward and punishment system, is God's final word for a hurting world.

The kind of forgiveness Jesus demands of us is **highly countercultural and extremely difficult**. We humans are capable of inflicting an extraordinary amount of pain on one another, after all, and it's hard to let that go even when our offender acknowledges the nature of their offense and their responsibility in its perpetration.

But as Christians our lives are to be patterned after a God who forgives his enemies.

Every time we follow this pattern rather than the rival patterns on offer around us, we testify to the gospel truth that unmerited grace is the means by which the world is made new.

The world is not made new by making sure that everyone gets only what they deserve, no more and no less. The world is not made new by repaying violence for violence, hurt for hurt, heartache with heartache. This simply reinforces the logic of a fallen world where we learn not to trust too easily, not to give of ourselves too willingly, and to make sure that we get what is owed to us.

The world is very familiar with this story. *We're* very familiar with this story. It's an old story, one that seems, on the surface, to protect us in limited ways, but which ultimately closes us off new possibilities, new futures.

In Jesus' teaching on forgiveness he shows us a different way, a better way, a way that *does* open up new possibilities, new ways of being in the world that provide a foretaste of what we believe will one day be a reality when the kingdom of God comes in fullness.

We have been forgiven much. In Christ God has forgiven us. **The forgiveness made possible by the cross of Jesus is the way in which the ultimate new possibility—God's kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven—comes about.**

So, how did the story I began with end? Well, initially I wasn't quite sure how to respond to Nicky's question. It was one of those moments where things suddenly seemed very clear and you don't quite know what to say or do.

Eventually, I simply smiled and told him "you don't know how happy it makes me to hear you say that. Hold on to that for as long as you can."

I don't know how long it will take before Nicky doesn't forgive so instinctively and comprehensively, but I pray that the power of forgiveness retains its hold on him and all of us as we make our way in this grace-starved world.

God knows our world needs more reckless forgivers, more people who rather than guarding themselves from the inevitable pain of living, seek to combat it as God has, through the power of grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

So in summary, I would like to leave you with two challenges based on the story I shared and this morning's text from Matthew:

- First, and perhaps most obviously, we need to be a people who forgive. We need to extend forgiveness and to be willing to ask for forgiveness knowing that we are a people who hurt one another, but also that we are a forgiven people whose hope is based on a God whose forgiveness knows no limit.
- Second, I would urge you to *pay attention to your lives*—to the ordinary everyday events and people through whom God speaks. God used a seven-year old boy to humble, teach, and encourage me in the midst of a frustrating day. The stuff of everyday life became an object lesson on the power of forgiveness.

God uses the stories of our everyday lives to get through to us, to remind us what kingdom people are to look like, to point to the hope that is ours as followers of Jesus, and to call us to reflect this hope to those around us. May God help us to forgive as we have been forgiven, that our lives would be an expression of gratitude and praise for all he has done.

Thanks be to God.