SERMON TITLE: "How Many Times?"
TEXT: Matthew 18:21-35
PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church
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In 1964, in a book called *Understanding Media*, Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan coined a famous phrase: "The medium is the message."

What he meant was that the *form* that a message is delivered in is important, and that it shapes—even determines—how the message is interpreted.

Whenever I have preached on parables, I have thought about McLuhan's phrase. Because the dominant medium Jesus taught in was *stories* and in some sense these stories *were* the message.

When we want a message to get across clearly, we often use clear, direct, and logical language. We use points and sub points that are numbered and organized in an easy-to-follow manner. We make conclusions and have summaries and graphs and charts to make sure nothing gets lost.

But Jesus didn't do this much. Instead, he told stories.

I think he knew that stories have a way of getting into us, and moving us in ways that other modes of discourse do not.

Stories invite us in. Stories allow us to locate ourselves in a different reality.

We need good stories to be gospel people.

I was a part of such a story a few years ago when we moved from Vancouver to Nanaimo.

This story may be familiar to some of you—it was in *Rejoice!* a while back—but I think it's a good story, and good stories are worth repeating.

For those wondering about the frequency with which my children make appearances in my sermon, I can only say that I have learned, over the years, to pay attention to the work of good theologians, and Nicky and Claire have been two very good ones over the last 10 years or so ☺.

They ask good questions. They see things that I don't. They are alive to mystery and wonder in ways that I sometimes am not.

They keep me accountable, often pointing out the gap between what I say and what I do.

This story is used with Nicky's permission—it is a story that comes from a time of transitions, which seemed appropriate given that our family has just gone through another one recently.

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 was tired and frazzled and 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 such situations can produce.

Then, as we were about to embark, Nicky, with his *brand new* bike, 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 with 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 rather beleaguered and ill-tempered lot, off to enjoy some "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 to the park, 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.

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.

We are broken people who do hurtful things surrounded by other broken people who do hurtful things.

This kind of situation 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?

Peter certainly seemed to think so, in this morning's parable.

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

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”—the most obvious example being the seven days of creation in the book of Genesis—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.

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 what if my forgiveness is not reciprocated?

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 calculating mindsets— our tendencies to try to figure out exactly how much is required of us and then go no further.

The rest of the passage has 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.

Jesus' story is meant to show the power of forgiveness.

Forgiveness means hope for the hopeless, new life for the dead and the dying (whether spiritually, emotionally, or physically), new opportunity for the beaten down and defeated, 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*.

BUT the kind of forgiveness Jesus modeled for us and demands of us is also **highly countercultural and extremely difficult**.

Forgiveness is hard. Anyone who has forgiven or even *tried* to forgive knows this.

The May 16 issue of the *Canadian Mennonite* contained a story that many of us are familiar with. It is the story of Cliff and Wilma Derksen, a Winnipeg couple whose thirteen year-old daughter Candace was murdered in 1985.

This past February, Mark Edward Grant was convicted of second degree murder in this case.

The Derksen's have walked the long, hard road of forgiveness in what seem to most of us like unimaginable circumstances.

A few quotes:

> Shortly after Candace's disappearance, the Derksens were visited by a man whose teenage daughter had been murdered several years earlier. When they saw how anger had destroyed his life, the resolved to take the path of forgiveness.
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> "I have to say, it wasn't an easy road," Cliff says. "About 1997, I bottomed out. I was in a state of rage. I was in trouble. I realized if I didn't work it out, I would lose my family, relationships, spiritual dynamic.
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> "I saw his [Mark's] picture, and it was very uncomfortable to see his picture alongside Candace's, but it wasn't anger," he says. "I found myself feeling compassion, sadness, over his life, wondering how he came to this point. I realized then that I had come along the path of forgiveness."

In a book called *Becoming Human*, Jean Vanier suggests that forgiveness is based on the three-fold conviction that:

1. All of us have value and share a common humanity
2. Each of us can change—human redemption is possible
3. Unity and peace are at the core of what all of us long for.

Without something like these three convictions at work, Vanier suggests, true forgiveness will be impossible for us.

I think we see elements of these in the story of Cliff and Wilma Derksen.

They came to see their daughter's murderer as a human being. They came to see that they would have no peace if they allowed anger to control their lives. They realized that redemption was possible.

There is power in forgiveness.

We need to forgive for the sake of those who have wronged us, certainly, but we also need to forgive for our own sakes.

We need to let go, to not allow the wrongs that have been done to us to define us and hold us.

As Christians our lives are to be patterned after a God who forgives freely—friends and enemies.

This is the path of health and strength for us, but it also points to the new reality that we believe Jesus brought about and is bringing about and will one day bring about in its totality.

Every time we follow Jesus' pattern of forgiveness rather than the rival patterns on offer around us—patterns of revenge, patterns of passive aggressive behaviour, patterns of withdrawal and retreat, patterns of long-held bitterness and feelings of superiority—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.

Our world is very familiar with this story. *We* are 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.

Nicky's simple question, "Why wouldn't I forgive you?" has stuck with me for a while now.

It is a reckless and probably irresponsible kind of forgiveness.

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

Would our relationships with our spouses, children, co-workers, etc be better or worse if we were reckless rather than cautious forgivers?

May God help us to forgive recklessly, as we have been forgiven.

May God give us the imagination to live better stories than the ones we and our world are so familiar with—stories of forgiveness and reconciliation, peace and unity, stories of redemption.

Amen.