

SERMON  
First Lutheran Church  
Aitkin, Minnesota

Matthew 18:21-35  
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen  
September 14, 2014

### **UNDER THE KITCHEN TABLE**

My brother Rod saved his logging money and bought a new bow and arrows. They were the real thing. They could be used for hunting. He was eighteen and I was eight. He didn't let me touch his bow and arrows, but he let me watch while he practiced. The Indians in my Fort Apache set had bows and arrows. Robin Hood and his men used bows and arrows too. I thought that maybe someday I might be able to get a bow and arrows myself.

One morning Rod came home from the woods with a broken arrow. He gave it to me. Well, this was a start toward my own bow and arrow set, but what does an eight year old do with a broken arrow? The three-edged arrow head was very hard and sharp. It had a very small point on it.

I don't know how it all happened. Somehow I was standing in the hallway, the bedroom that I shared with Rod. And I was looking out the screen door into the back yard. It was a very hot summer day. The sun beat down from directly above. There was hardly a cloud in the sky. Yet, it was so muggy. The thermometer outside our kitchen window read 90 degrees. Without air conditioning or even fans, the house was not much cooler. There in mid-afternoon, I was hot, sweaty and bored.

I never would have guessed that trouble might be in the air. Somehow the sharp point on the broken arrow that I was holding started poking up against the screen. In northern Minnesota, in the dog days of summer when high temperatures and high humidity combined, screens were very important. Screens meant that the cooling evening breeze could slip in and caress the folks who were trying to find relief from the heat that had baked and drained them earlier in the day. In northern Minnesota, in the heart of lake and swamp country, screens were very important. Those screens meant that the blood-hungry mosquitos could be kept outside. So, this night for instance, if a person finally cooled down enough to fall asleep, they wouldn't have to fear being eaten alive in their bed.

None of these winged pests was around as I began to work that arrow head against the screen that stood between me and the great outdoors. Had the mosquitos been buzzing outside the screen, better wisdom might have risen up and discouraged my antics. I don't think that I had a plan. My arrow head tip fit perfectly into the space encompassed by those thin, woven wires. It was just an easy push and all of a sudden one side of the tiny, square shaped screen pattern broke. I pushed a little harder. Two more little wires broke. Without much

effort at all, I managed to make a little capital “L” shape in the screen, no more than maybe an inch high. That went so well; I started on a second letter.

It was about that time that my mother came up from downstairs where she had been doing the laundry in our wringer washer. She was headed outside to hang her wash on the clothes line. As the basement door swung open, there I stood, arrow still in hand. The look on her face brought me to realize that maybe this had not been a good idea.

**“What are you doing? Did your brother give you that arrow? Why are you poking holes in the screen door? Don’t you know that the mosquitos can get through that hole? ”**

Mom didn’t give me a chance to answer any of her rapid-fire questions. Then she dropped the bomb, **“Wait until your father gets home. He will have something to say about this.”** Blistering hot day in Alborn, Minnesota. Far hotter at Diamond Tool and Horseshoe Company where Dad worked in the hellish forge shop. The mosquitos would be out in full force tonight. My screen door timing was not the best. Dad would be home by 4:30 p.m. It was now 3:00 p.m. I decided to wait for Dad under the kitchen table... Guilty and afraid...

Mom and Dad were working hard to raise and care for a good, solid family. Good behavior was important, not only for appearance’s sake, but also for the eventual quality of life the child grown to adulthood might be able to possess. Well behaved kids grew up to be responsible adults. That’s how my parents were raised and that’s how they tried to raise their own children. “Spare the rod. Spoil the child.” I was no stranger to spankings when I grew up. That philosophy later visited my own parenting style, and that of my wife. Both of us had been raised with a familiarity to corporal punishment – spankings.

It was a beautiful summer day. I arrived home from work just before supper time. My wife informed me that our six year old daughter, Leah, had repeatedly been tormenting her three year old brother John that day. She had a way of goading him into committing troublesome acts. She coached him into doing things that she knew full well would get him into trouble with Mom and Dad. As a family, we had talked repeatedly about this kind of behavior and it had been made clear to Leah that she was not to do it **anymore**. On this summer day, **anymore** happened again, repeatedly. Leah was guilty, caught red-handed. Punishment had to follow. Her mother was sick and tired of being the one who, as full-time homemaker, always had to administer the discipline. So Leah, like with me years before, had to wait until her father got home from work to face her judgment. Today it was my turn to spank my own child...

There we sat, side by side, on the second step up from the landing inside our split entry house. It was a dark moment. My very smart, blond haired, blue eyed little girl listened quietly as I rehearsed with her the negative behavior that she had carried out, why it was wrong and the consequences which had earlier been spelled out. Did she understand? Did she know that I

didn't want to give her a spanking? Would she never do this bad behavior again? "Yes, yes and no, never." But the spanking still had to come. She didn't plead. She didn't cry. She just sat quietly, stubbornly refusing to let this get the best of her.

Over my knee she went. Three sharp swats to her butt. By then both of us were sobbing. She got up. I hugged her and said that I was sorry. She went to her room, maybe to hide under her bed. Her mother and her three year old brother listened in the living room as this whole drama unfolded on the stairs below them. I don't think there were very many more spankings administered in our house from that day forward.

It was 4:30 p.m. Dad's blue Dodge pickup truck snaked its way along our mile long, town road and pulled into our yard. I heard him drive up, the engine stop and then the sound of the truck door slamming shut. It was awfully hot outside and inside too. After a long minute, Dad climbed the steps and came to the screen door. The holes that I had made were close to the handle. He didn't need to be told what I had done. He saw it for himself. Upon entering the house, Mom assured him that it was me who had poked the holes.

Out from under the table I came. A short conversation about the error of my ways. A few swift swats to my butt with an open hand and we were done. Had it been Mom who was administering the spanking, it would have been done with the elder brush switch cut from the nearby woods and kept handy, tucked just behind the refrigerator. I doubt that Dad, or Mom, relished administering corporal punishment to their kids. I dreaded receiving it. Once done, the air was clear. The offense was forgotten. Dad went off to the garage and came back with a little can of black paint to cover the gaping wounds in our screen door. I went outside to ride my bike down the town road and to lick my emotional wounds. Fresh start for the little dickens Darrell. And maybe Charly and Olga's kids would grow up to be good people.

That is the goal of so many families today as well – raising kids to become good people. Very real concerns about child abuse have long since brought about the demise of corporal punishment for most families. Today parents seem prone to using the activity strategy – keeping their kids busy. Most parents seem convinced that in order for their children to be good, they have to be constantly active. Children today are enrolled in so many organized sports, clubs, classes, lessons and artistic undertakings that they barely have time to just play, to just be kids. Parents are hopeful that active kids will do well and against all odds become professional athletes, musicians, dancers, etc. Or at least, all of the hours of training, miles of travel and tens of thousands of dollars of expense will win a full ride to a top flight college and the securing of a high paying career... And the parents work more hours. And go more into debt. And spend less time in the home just being family together. And some parents believe that their child never does anything wrong – that the teacher is wrong, or the coach or the

police officer. And some children have parents who do not much care what happens to them. And some kids have no parents at all...

My brother Rod got a bow and arrows. I got a spanking. I don't remember him getting a spanking for giving me the broken arrow which got me into trouble. Maybe it wasn't the arrow's fault, or his. But, somehow, hopefully, it all worked together to teach me to be a better person. Maybe life is about more than just being a good person? Sometimes life can get very hot, or very cold, or very tense, or very wrong. It is good, at such times, to have someone who cares and is looking out for you. That's what Mom and Dad were trying to do. That broken arrow was one more chance for me to learn about life and taking care of one's home and world. My most important learning from my parents was that they loved me even little dickens that I was. In this difficult world, where we often find ourselves in tough spots, guilty situations – **God is looking out for us, caring for us, loving us.**

In our Gospel text from **Matthew 18:21-35**, Peter asked Jesus, "**Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?**" Peter was ready for the big A+ pat on the back from Jesus. Jewish law only required a person to forgive someone else **three times**. **Seven** is the perfect number for the Jews. So Peter figured, **after having seen Jesus forgive so many people**, that seven times of forgiveness would surely gain Jesus' high five... Wrong. Jesus said, "**Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy seven times.**"

You heard the text read. Jesus goes on to tell Peter about a king who did a little audit on his servants. The king discovered that one of his servants, this is really crazy, one of his servants owed him ten thousand talents. **Ten thousand talents** equal **60,000,000 denarii**. A denarii is **one day's pay** for the average worker. This servant owed the king **164,000 years of work**. You heard it. The king ordered that the servant, his family and all of their possession be sold and restitution be made. **Impossible**, but at least this would show others that they better not mess with the king. The servant begged for mercy, promising to repay everything. The king, out of pity, **not only released him, but forgave** the **entire debt!** Crazy mercy, generosity. Crazy king.

You heard the story. Then the forgiven slave went out and confronted a fellow slave who owed him **one hundred denarii/3 months' pay**. Now the second slave also begged the first for mercy, but received none. The first slave had the second slave arrested and thrown into jail until the debt could be paid. The other servants told the king. The king arrested the first servant and ordered that he be "**tortured**" until his entire debt was paid off. Jesus concludes the parable with these words, "**So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.**" These words were spoken by the same Jesus who, when hanging suspended by spikes from a tortuous cross, said, "**Father forgive them for they know not what they do.**" I drove those spikes. You drove those spikes... Debt?

So Peter thought we should forgive each other **7 times**. Jesus said we should forgive each other **77 times**. This number can also be translated as **7 x 70**, so that must be **490** times forgiveness. But in Greek, it is more. This is the number which represents **infinity** in Greek, forgiveness times infinity. Even the first servant's **164,000 years of laborious debt** is **less than** the **infinite forgiveness** that Jesus brings and advocates for God's people!

I sure would rather have had forgiveness than a spanking for my screen door offense. I sure would rather have forgiven rather than spanked my Leah for her constantly trying to get her little brother into trouble. Does God punish us when we do wrong, or fail to do the right? Or are the things that go haywire in our lives simply the consequences of our own poor choices or of the broken world that we live in? Wouldn't God, our divine parent, creator of all that is, wouldn't God be justified in punishing us for:

- Goading our sisters and brothers into bad behavior?
- Harming or wasting God's precious creation?
- Being selfish, envious, hateful, hurtful, looking down our noses at others?

When my spanking was done, I was off to a fresh start. And we hoped for better times ahead. When Leah's spanking was done, she was off to a fresh start. And we hoped for better times ahead. When Jesus' death on the cross was done, you and I were **off to a fresh start – 3 times, 7 times, 77 times, 490 times, an infinite number of times in the eyes of God. How can times or love get any better than that?** My mom and dad were doing the best that they could to give me a good life. My wife and I were doing the best that we could to give Leah a good life. **God is way better at giving good lives than you and me.**

**Mr. Rogers**, the old Presbyterian minister, children's television host, put it this way:

**"I believe that at the center of the universe there dwells a loving spirit who longs for all that's best in all of creation, a spirit who knows the great potential of each planet as well as each person, and little by little will love us into being more than we ever dreamed possible. That loving spirit would rather die than give up on any one of us."**

Every time we make **confession** at the beginning of our worship services, Jesus forgives us. Every time we take into our mouths the **body and blood of Christ**, God forgives us. Every time we **ask**, God forgives us. And if Jesus is right, maybe **God even forgives us before we ask and forever and ever**. Remember that kind of Godly love the next time you blow it. Remember that kind of Godly love when someone else needs forgiving too. God help us. This is a **forgiveness place. No need to hide** under the kitchen table or under the bed. Thanks be to God. Amen.

