22nd Sunday after Trinity
Rolling Meadows - 1967

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IN NOMINE JESU

Psalm 130: 1-4 Out of the Depths I cry to Thee, O Lord! Lord, hear my voice! Let Thy ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! If Thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared.

WHO, ME?

Things are not going well at home. Father and mother have noticed repeatedly that some of their money - loose change - has been missing. They call all the children together for a family council. Father begins the interrogation, feeling somewhat like a district attorney cross-examining his own flesh and blood - and before long he discovers that he is not getting very far. Each of his children insists he is ~~are~~ completely innocent - and when he dares to insinuate that one of the other of them might be guilty, there is an expression of great horror agony and pain that father could possibly imagine such a thing - the eyes open wide with sheer amazement, ~~that anyone could suspect such a thing~~; and a voice asks indignantly: WHO, ME? Each has an alibi, and each has a number of reasons why one of the other brothers or sisters might be guilty. Only 1 incident out of millions of others going on all the time!

In all of us there is a strong disposition to excuse ourselves from responsibility - to cover up rather than to open up. All of us like to play the game called Passing the Buck. The first people on earth became buck-passers, protesting that whatever had happened was not their fault. Their descendants have not changed, and today the world is filled with people who would just as soon blame someone else - anyone else at all, including God, for whatever goes wrong. Confronted with the mandates of God's Law, who ~~will~~ holds every man to account, they respond with an air of injured innocence: WHO, ME? WHAT DID I EVER DO TO GOD? The implication is, of course, that if God will just leave them alone, they will repay the compliment!

God cannot abide this live and let live philosophy - no matter how popular it might be. He is God, and He will be God. Down deep inside, every man knows this to be true. Knowing it to be true, every man has to admit that something is wrong. In his inner being he fears God may be keeping score - that somewhere everything is being written down for future reference. The Psalmist recorded the universal feeling of all mankind in the most explicit terms: IF THOU, O LORD, SHOULDST MARK INIQUITIES, LORD, WHO COULD STAND?

It is man's fear that God is keeping score. The Bible tells us that God indeed is keeping score - that men will be judged out of that book which they thei selves are writing with their own attitudes and actions.... I have heard people sa in so many words: I have nothing to be ashamed of; I have nothing to fear. The judgment of God doesn't mean anything to me..... Blindness has never been cured by bravado. If God is keeping score, recording every violent act and every lustful thought - every silent hate and every wayward prejudice - every outcropping of selfishness and every disregard for the rights of others - everything done and everything left undone - every loveless act and every lost opportunity to show forgiveness - every instance of failure to honor God as He would be honored above all others and every refusal to worship Him and give Him the praise due His Holy Name - MEN AND WOMEN HAVE GOOD REASON TO FEAR. This is the volume we are composin What a tremendous book it has turned out to be.

While all of us are writing our own book, God is writing His: IF THOU, O LORD, SHOULDST MARK INIQUITIES, LORD, WHO COULD STAND? BUT THERE IS FORGIVENESS WITH THEE, THAT THOU MAYEST BE FEARED. There is eternal bookkeeping of the record we ourselves have made and are even now making. God lists everything, leaving nothing out. Only when we recognize this fact and quit asking, WHO, ME? do we begin to understand what happened when Christ died. Entering our own history by the express Will of His Father to carry out the purpose of His great Fatherly heart, Christ lived and died for us. For the sake of Christ, who gave His life in all innocence for us, God forgives. THE SON OF GOD NAILED TO THE CROSS, St. Paul tells us, ALL THE HANDWIRING OF ORDINANCES THAT WERE AGAINST US. In view of Christ's Cross, GOD FORGIVES sin - erases it, blots it out, treats it as if it never existed.

The greatness of God's Grace will never seem very impressive to a man who refuses to admit his sin. Many people won't accept God's forgiveness because they won't accept their own guilt. They prefer to walk around making excuses and alibis - continually covering up, rather than opening up to what is plain to everyone except possibly themselves.... It is terribly hard to accept forgiveness at any time. It is impossible to accept forgiveness when you won't admit to yourself the guilt for which forgiveness is extended.

It is so hard to believe in the reality of Divine Forgiveness because forgiveness is so unnatural. We don't like to forgive each other - we don't even like to forgive ourselves.... Freud talked about a life wish and a death wish, both of which he found in every man. In reality, it is not a death wish at all that forces people to the wall, causing 20 to 25 thousand Americans to commit suicide every year. It is a feeling of guilt - repressed, unconfessed, and therefore unforgiven that causes people to be what they are and to act as they do - insisting on punishing themselves in an attempt to achieve some release from that gnawing pain which has entwined itself around their souls.

Punishing yourself offers no guarantee that God will not punish you. Trying to appease and expiate your own guilt is not the way to forgiveness. A fellow pastor ~~told me~~ tells of a poor old grandmother whose marriage took place over 70 years ago, still punishing herself because the birth of her first child took place too close to the date of her marriage. Still carrying her guilt, she came to the pastor and asked him to falsify a marriage or a baptismal certificate so that the facts would not come to light. Facts are facts, and forgiveness is mighty hard to come by.

Husband and wife have a quarrel. Invariably, they begin to dredge up what happened long ago: 15 years ago you made some slurring remarks about my cooking - 8 years ago you spoke harshly to my mother - 20 years ago you lost $1000 in the stock market - 12 years ago you disagreed with me when I wanted to discipline our boy. So the catalog is made up. Suddenly it becomes apparent that there has been no forgiveness in this relationship. All the hates have been saved up for an appropriate time - to be trotted out when they will do the most good - or the most harm.

It is not natural to forgive. Life itself is unforgiving. People don't forgive us. We find it difficult to forgive them. We don't even forgive ourselves What reason is there to believe that God forgives? If God Himself is holy and requires holiness of us, how can He possibly forgive? If Thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God; and it is a fearful price that He paid to forgive us our sins. Guilt has been removed only because the debt has been paid. Every blow of the whip - every nail driven into Christ's Cross was intended for us. In His suffering we see a little bit of the price paid for all the hate and all the evil in the world - all the lust and all the lovelessness - all the rebellion and all the selfishness. In Christ, God took our place and paid the full price. In Christ, there is forgiveness. IF THE SON SHALL MAKE YOU FREE, He said, YOU SHALL BE FREE INDEED... THERE IS FORGIVENESS WITH THEE, said the Psalmist, THAT THOU MAYEST BE FEARED.

What does it mean to fear God? It does not mean to grow pale at the mention of His Name. It does not mean to run and hide. That's the way some people seem to fear God on Sunday morning. It means rather to go and meet Him with a full sense of responsibility for guilt and a full acceptance of His gracious forgiveness bought at the price - the awful price - of Christ's Cross. It means to take God seriously without the flippant suggestions that we can take or leave His grace as if it were of no consequence. It means to be afraid of offending the Most High God - to be afraid of being cut off from Him. It means standing in awe and reverence before Him Who forgives out of the goodness of His great heart.

In the forgiving Word of ~~God~~ the Cross the incomprehensibile greatness of God - the intolerable glory of His Godhead - the glory of His grace - has appeared, has appeared to eyes that cannot comprehend it even as they gaze upon it. It has been revealed to hearts that stand in trembling awe of it even as they believe it. This grace of which the Psalmist sings is no cheap, easy grace - no easy commodity which complacency can casually appropriate. We can be sure of it - surer of it than or ourselves or anything in the whole world. But we cannot be complacent about it. FORGIVENESS REMAINS THE PERPETUAL MIRACLE. Luther spells it out: O GOD, he says, IF ALL DID NOT DEPEND UPON THY MERCY, IF WE COULD REMOVE SIN BY OUR POWER, NO ONE WOULD FEAR THEE, AND THE WHOLE WORLD WOULD IN ITS PRIDE DESPISE THEE.

Life is a strange paradox. Asking WHO, ME? men will accept little responsibility and admit no personal guilt at all before God. Yet people all over the

world are smothered today by a GREAT GUILT COMPLEX. In their guilt, they try to live off the husks of the far country. This is not life as God intended life to be, and as He can remake it with the sunshine of His favor expressed through His own greathearted forgiveness.

Not so long ago a psychiatrist remarked to a chaplain at one of the great mental hospitals in our country: Why didn't you guys tell me before this about absolution? This is the greatest thing since the miracle drugs for the mentally ill. DIVINE ABSOLUTION was a fact long before penicillin. It is still a fact for the one who comes to himself and confesses: Father, I have sinned against heaven and in Thy sight and am no more worthy to be called Thy son. In that moment the miracle occurs - the high majesty of God speaks the word of forgiveness - the grea King forgives His slave that immeasurable and insurmountable debt - and he goes down to his house justified - at peace - at pease with God, himself, and every single one of his fellowmen. It is the peace of forgiveness - the peace of God which passes all understanding - the peace that dares to sing: THERE IS FORGIVENES WITH THEE THAT THOU MAYEST BE FEARED! Amen.