22nd Sunday after Trinity
Rolling Meadows - 1962

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IN NOMINE JESU

St. Matthew 18: 32-35 Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O Thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall My Heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.

FORGIVEN --- FORGIVING

Christianity is unique among the religions of the world. Its uniqueness is not simply a matter of superficial observances. It goes straight to the heart of a man, affecting his attitudes and actions, if he is a confesser and not just a professor of the Christian faith. Nowhere is the uniqueness of the Christian faith more evident than in the fact of FORGIVENESS. Sunday after Sunday we confess in the Apostles' Creed: I believe in the forgiveness of sins! Forgiveness is a quality that is not natural to the human heart. It is not like diamonds that can be found under the surface of the ground. Forgiveness is not an ability that can be taught the way a child can be taught to talk, or that can be retaught as a man must be retaught to walk after a serious illness. Forgiveness cannot be dug up from some hidden corner of your personality, and you cannot develop it simply by exercising some forgotten muscles. No man has ever learned to forgive by simply putting his mind to it.

The fact is people don't want to forgive, and they don't want forgiveness. They resent forgiveness. To be forgiven means you have done something wrong, and most people are not ready to admit that. At least they are not ready to admit that they have done something so bad that they need forgiveness. It's the other fellow that needs to be forgiven, and there are better methods for dealing with him than to forgiven him. Treat your friends right; you almost have to in order to save face Treat your enemies as they treat you; you almost have to in order to save face. The pagan philosopher Cicero said it ~~even more~~ quite bluntly: Love your friends and hate your enemies!

Belief in the forgiveness of sins flies in the face of every natural tendency in human attitude and action. Other religions go along with the natural tendencies of the human heart -- many of them setting high standards for the conduct of their adherents, but all of them advocating salvation as a goal to be achieved,

to be won, to be worked out by discovering and using the natural resources within the personality of man himself. This do-it-yourself theology appeals to people. They like to hear that they can save themselves. They are ready to adopt new and unaccustomed methods to achieve that worthy end. People enjoy being told that they have to change their way of life, because they know it is true. But they don't enjoy being told that they must be forgiven. They don't enjoy being told that self-improvement is a dead-end street. No matter how far you go along that road, what was empty before will be empty still; what was incomplete before will be incomplete still; what was wrong before will be wrong still. In spite of all its promise of better things, moral self-improvement based on the natural resources of human personality fails to make a man righteous and succeeds finally only in making him selfrighteously unbearable.

If we cannot improve ourselves, how can we get out of this mess?

Is there, then, no hope for a satisfying life? The unique message of Christianity is that there is hope - hope based not upon our own merits but upon the mercies of a great and good God who would have all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the Truth. God could have left us in the soup, but He did not. He could have condemned us and let it go at that, but He did not. Instead He sent His unique Son to our little planet on a rescue operation. The Son came, was born as a man, lived His holy life without flaw of any kind, and laid down His life in all innocency - paying the price and enduring the punishment for sin, not in His own behalf but in ours. This actually happened, as His Cross testifies. He actually did what He came to do, as His empty tomb testifies. He is the Savior of the world, having provided an eternal redemption for every one of us. By virtue of His redemption it is possible for me to say to you today that GOD FORGIVES. Christ crucified and raised from the dead is Himself the living evidence that God forgives. St. Paul put it this way: In Him we have redemption, even the forgiveness of sins.

Forgiveness is not a cheap commodity. It did not come easily. It was not possible for God to say simply, Forget about it; don't give the matter another thought. He is a God of justice, and the price of justice has to be paid. That

price was paid by the Son of God. The price He paid was offered not in currency, but in His life's blood. This is the Gospel, the good news which makes the Christian faith what it is. Believing the Gospel is to say in all confidence: I believe in the forgiveness of sins." Socrates once said, It may be that God can forgive sins, but I do not know how. One greater than Socrates has come, and you can know how God forgives. The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin.

Forgiveness makes a difference - all the difference in the world. People are walking the streets today who can tell you all about it. Feelings of guilt, in many cases all too justified, had put them flat on their backs and made them physically ill. Others were on the verge of mental crackups, unable to live with the haunting memories of the past. Only when they became sure - absolutely sure - that God indeed forgives, did they rise to a new life of hope and courage. Forgiveness makes a difference! The man who has been unfaithful to his wife and neglectful to his family knows what forgiveness is when he returns, humbly apologetic, confessing the he has made a fool of himself, to receive what he had no right to expect: the forgiveness of his wife and children. If he is any kind of a man at all, he will never forget or abuse again the love which made it possible for her to forgive. Her forgiveness has given him a new lease on life. Similarly when God forgives us, we become new men. If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away. As we have become new men in Christ, we will also be ready to forgive.

God does not turn up His nose at you. He forgives. When He forgives, He forgets. If God so forgives us, how is it possible for any one of us to turn up his nose at a fellow man in refusal to forgive? It is possible, of course, It happens every day. People who profess to believe in the forgiveness of sins act toward their neighbors as if they had never heard of forgiveness before. They don't actually say to God, Deal with me as I deal with other people, but by their actions they ask Him to do just that. A sea captain once said to John Wesley, I never forget a friend or forgive a foe. Wesley's reply went to the heart of the matter: It is to be hoped, sir, that you have never sinned against God!

Our Lord told a dramatic story about a servant who had been discovered in the embezzlement of $10,000,000. According to the historian Josephus, the whole revenue of King Herod the Great for an entire year was less than one tenth of that amount. In other words the servant could not possible repay what he owed. When the kind ordered him and his whole family to be sold into slavery, the servant begged for mercy. In response to his pleading, the king was moved to pity. In an amazing demonstration of mercy he forgave the entire debt. Yet, on he way home to tell his family the good news, this same man ran across one of his friends who owed him a piddling amount of about $20.00. Seizing the friend by the throat, he demanded, Pay me at once what you owe me. The debtor pleaded to no avail and was thrown into jail until he could pay his debt.

With deliberate exaggeration, Christ's story dramatizes the position of one who has been forgiven by God and refuses to forgive others. To underline the point, Christ added, My heavenly Father will do the same thing to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart. If you say, I believe in the forgiveness of sins, and refuse to forgive those who have injured you, you declare that you do not really believe what you say you believe. The absence of a forgiving spirit is a sure sign that God's forgiveness has not come home - is not known, believed, and appreciated.

How is it with you? Are you ready to forgive? Are there people whom you obstinately refuse to forgive? If there are, your heart is not right with God who has forgiven you. Forgiveness is God's way to the solution of human problems. There is no other way. History cannot be made right, except by forgiveness. Human relationships cannot be put in order, except by forgiveness. Quarrels in the family cannot be resolved except by forgiveness. Strife will never be ended except by forgiveness.

Forgiveness leaves little room for the ordinary human defenses; It is his place to come to me and apologize; first she must speak to me; I'm not going to take the first step, that's up to him. It is a good thing for the world that God did not

act that way toward us. He does not expect us to take that attitude toward others. He expects of us that we be ready to forgive as He is ready to forgive. We must be ready to forget as He is ready to forget. As the English preacher Charles Spurgeon once put it: When you bury a mad dog, you don't leave his tail above the ground.

The attitude of the unmerciful servant in Christ's story illustrates a common fact of life: most of us have one standard for ourselves and another for other people. We are something like the athlete in the locker room who complained that someone had stolen three of his towels. When asked to describe the lost articles, he said, Two of them were marked 'Pullman' and the other was marked 'Hotel New Yorker.' Where would we be, you and I, if the just God required of us what we so often require of other people before we are ready to forgive? The message of Christ's Cross come straight from the heart of God: I forgive, and I forget. As it is with God so it must be with God's people. God help us so to say and confess: I believe in the forgiveness of sins! It is the one thing our hard-bitten world needs more than any other!

Amen.