22nd Sunday after Trinity
Rolling Meadows - 1966

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IN NOMINE JESU

St. Matthew 18: 21,22 Then Peter came up and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy time seven."

WHEN CAN I LET GO AND EXPLODE?

As a lad of 14 I left home to attend Prep School and begin preparing for the Holy Ministry. This was at a time when hazing, and shagging, and detention, and kangaroo courts were still very much in vogue. Upper classmen took great delight in demonstrating their authority and superiority over freshmen. As I happened to be one of the biggest fellows in the freshman class (I was 5'8" then and am only 5'8½" now), I became the particular object of their sadistic ~~and sometimes even fiendish~~ overtures. Now I am not in the least trying to intimate that I was always innocent of the hard knocks that came my way. However, one senior in particular seemed to take special delight in flogging me with a rubber hose he had for that purpose. On many occasions he succeeded in raising some quite sizeable welts on my you-know-where - and I remember remarking to my roommate: One of these days I'm going to forget that I am an underclassman and he is an upper classman, and I'm going to let go and explode and give him what he has coming. I can still hear his reply ringing in my ears: As a future pastor you really cannot do that. And I said, But after all, I am only human; this is the limit and I'm through.

The limit! This is what Peter was asking about. He wanted to know when it is reached. For Peter, as we know, had a temper, and he was afraid that never again would he be allowed to let go and vent his anger. He too must have thought, After all, I'm only human. There must be some point when one can stop loving one's neighbor with good conscience.

And this brings us right to the theme of the parable which Jesus told Peter in response to his question. The chief character is the servant who stands between his king and his neighbor. He therefore stands in a double relationship - and when he fails to occupy this double relationship, when something is lacking here, then he is actually missing his life, his destiny; then it all ends in hell - just as the parable says.

First, what about the relationship to the king, to God? This is a very problematical thing. The parable says that man - this is the best way to express it - owes the king millions of dollars. This is an enormous sum. The only way he can meet it is to surrender his own life and the lives of his family. In plain language, this signifies that to be in debt, to be a sinner means that we owe to God everything we are and everything we have. Is it necessary to illustrate this? God created us. Therefore He can demand that we come back to Him exactly as we were when we left His hands. This is a tremendous, a frightening statement.

What were we like when we left God's hands? Well, He gave us eyes to se His glory. And, God help us, what have our eyes not beheld, what have they not lusted after, what sights have not defiled them! He gave us our mouths and the gift of speech in order that we might praise Him and communicate with our neighbor And, God help us, what have these mouths not spoken and whispered and hissed! How many a curse has stood right beside a prayer; how often have these lips not denied defamed, destroyed, desolated, distressed, put others to death. He gave us our hands in order that they might serve and work and give help in His Name and thus in all these things be lifted up to His glory. And, God help us, what have these hands not done! We shudder to describe their deeds.... And now God demands us back again, just as we were when we left His good and eternal Hands. We ought for once to see very clearly what it would mean to be compelled to face a person who knows everything about us: every secret word, every secret dream, every real thought behind my polite words, every act under the cover of darkness. Before such a person we would want to disappear and sink into the ground. Anybody who has ever faced the question whether he should confess know what a struggle it demands, what a death it is.... And what happens here is that a man actually stands before God and confesses everything to Him and this turns out to be his death sentence. He not only feels like sinking into the ground, he actually does. No man can stand before God if he takes Him seriously.

Against this dark and hopeless backdrop there comes the great mystery of the Gospel. When the king looks at this poor, miserable, corrupt fellow who has

squandered his Master's goods, He lifts him up from the ground, takes his hand, absolves him, and gives him a new start. There is certainly nothing logical about it. What is logical is what this man did to his fellow servant: he made him pay back his debt, his incomparably smaller debt. Sin and retribution belong together. This is logical.

And then the miracle happens. God snatches us out of this terrible logic and says simply, You shall be My child again. And He says this not because He is easygoing, not because He is indifferent and cannot be hard - the conclusion of the parable shows how infinitely hard and consistent God can be. No, God is not soft. Nor should we be soft and let our fellow men get away with everything in the name of forgiveness. The Christian dare not be the point of least resistance in the world. Very often there must be some objective, matter-of-fact reckoning. Even the king in our parable does some reckoning and is objective about it. There is no concealing, no covering up the fact that the wicked servant embezzled ten million dollars. But this is the wonderful part of it: God seeks you and me with such an everlasting love that, despite all the calculating and all the objectivity, He sees, not the object, but back of the object his unhappy child, not only the values but also the person - that when He condemns the sin He does not condemn us, that though He calls sin by its name, He also calls me by my name, and calls me His child. And when His Son dies on the Cross we get some idea of what it costs Him to beat down the logic of His holy righteousness and remain our Father. Truly, this is no kindly God who covers everything with the mantle of His love; this is no harmless Namby-pamby; this is the holy, subduing God who breaks the cursed spell of relentless logic and gives us the miracle of sonship.

What must have been this man's state of mind when he left this scene of clemency and pardon? A short time before, he was a depressed man, suffocating under the realization that sooner or later the time of reckoning must come. It made the costly carpets, which he had secured with the embezzled millions, burn beneath his feet; it gave the champagne a searing, sour taste; it made him wake up at night in a cold sweat. And now all this - the fear, the shame, the pangs of

conscience - was gone, blown away without a trace. Now he departed richer than he had ever been before, for he had experienced the ineffable goodness of the king. He had never known that before. Compared to the joy and relief of such forgiveness all the substitute joys he had bought with his dishonest money were mere trifles. Now, for the first time, he knew what life really means.

But now our story takes a sudden and appalling turn. No sooner has this forgiven man returned to ordinary life, after leaving the Sunday atmosphere at the palace, than the blessed experience is obliterated. There he meets a poor wretch to whom he had once made a small loan, a few pennies - in any case the merest trifle compared with what he had owed to his master. He may even have extended this credit from the funds he had embezzled and not from his own pocket. Mr. X, as we may call the unmerciful servant, is suddenly in the same relation to his fellow servant as the king was in relation to him just a few moments before. Except that now the situation is far more insignificant; it is only a matter of a few paltry pennies. But now he treats his fellow servant in exactly the opposite way from that in which his master treated him. He simply allows the logic of retribution to run its full course. You hit me, so I hit you; you owe me, so I collect. This is human and legal. It is all in accord with the principles of justice.

What a terrible self-contradiction this is, what abominable hypocrisy! It simply makes our Christianity unworthy of belief. God must put up with our despising Him, but anybody who despises us must suffer the consequences. We are constantly rebelling against God. When something happens in our life which we do not understand or when things go wrong we immediately begin to sulk: How can God permit such a thing? But when somebody rebels against us, reproaches us, and does not understand us, we get peeved. For God we have very little time, very little room in our hearts, and usually no money. But woe to the person who pays no attention to us, woe to him who ignore us - he'll pay for it! We are always judging by two different standards. That we should be forgiven and exempt from the law of retribution, that we should be given another chance by God, this is

only right and proper. After all, this is God's line, that's what He's there for But we go on treating our debtors as before. This is our line - this is the human, all-too-human element in us.

But now it turns out that God won't stand for it. Forgiveness which is not passed on to others is an abomination to Him. He takes it back again. When God forgives us, this is a chance, and opportunity, nothing more. A chance is a limited probation. God has affirmed with the blood of His Son, with His heart's blood, that He loves me, that I may be His child, and that my conscience may be free. This is, so to speak, the agreement, the covenant, which He offers me. But now I must ratify the agreement. And the way I ratify it - and the only way I ratify it - is by taking what God has given to me and passing it on to others. If I do not do this, I contradict the terms of the agreement. Everything then that God has done for me becomes an indictment if I do not allow His love to flow through me to others. For then I have embezzled the mercy of God; then suddenly I am millions of dollars in debt; then I have allowed Jesus to die in vain. Then I am a murderer. Yes, that is what it says: In anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. Where am I really? Could it be that I myself am marching, with this sermon ringing in my ears, to my jailers?

So Peter has the answer to his question of when the limit has been reached, when a man can stop being patient and forgiving and may with good conscience explode. It is not a matter of self-control, of putting on the brakes, or trying to swallow your anger. It is not a matter of exerting great will power; it is rather a matter of turning our eyes very slightly and looking at the Cross. Then the will will function of itself. It is added unto us. Then we shall not so easly grow weary. As we have received mercy, we do not grow weary. For God has not grown weary of us either. Thank God that He does not! Thank God that we are permitted to be an echo of that unceasing love that comes from the Cross. Amen.