22nd Sunday after Trinity
Rolling Meadows, 1963

Rev. Carl F. Thrun

IN NOMINE JESU

St. Matthew 5: 43-48 Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? Do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

"IF I WERE GOD"

Like a sharp surgeon's scalpel this word of Christ cuts to the depths of a man's soul. People today are as little prepared for the shock of such a statement as were our Lord's contemporaries. There is no attempt to qualify or water down human conduct, which takes as its slogan, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. Jesus says, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

Right here is where many people part company with God. The way God sends rain does not sound just to them. This is not the way they would do it if they were God. If I were God, they say, I would be just. If there is anything wrong with this world, it is injustice. The innocent suffer, the poor are oppressed, untimely death comes to those in the prime of life, tragedies occur that are unexplainable, criminals get away with murder, nations prosper who have no regard for the rights of other people, and those who are trying to do their best get it in the neck. If I were God, I would change all of that. Our sense of justice is often offended by a lot of things that happen in the world. Some people are so troubled by what they see in the world that they have come to the conclusion that there is no God. Others accept the fact that God is, but they are not sure He is interested in the world He has made. Still others would like to think that there is a God who cares, but once in a while even they begin to wonder. If God really is active in the world, why do things happen which run counter to everything we know or feel to be right, and good, and proper?

This kind of finger-pointing, of course, rarely turns itself inward. We are quick to see what is wrong with the world, but we are blind to what is wrong with our own hearts and lives. As our Lord put it, we can easily detect the tiny splinter in the other fellow's eye, and at the same time be completely oblivious to the huge log that is in our own eye. Someone has pointed out, You can get to the very depth of human behavior without going outside yourself. Who of us can honestly stand up to God & say: "I have loved you with all of my heart, & soul, & strength, & mind!" Where would we be if God were guided by our sense of justice? Let's say you had created the world and all of the people in the world. What would you have done when the pride of your creation rebelled against you, himself trying to play the role of God, and engaging in acts which could only be called high treason? What would you have done when you surveyed the wreckage that resulted - the scum and the slime and the evil that has laid itself over all of life? the hardness, & hate, & spite that is in the heart of every man? If I were God, said Luther, and the world treated me as has treated Him, I would have kicked the wretched thing to pieces long ago.

What do you parents do when your son or daughter is disobedient or lies to you? What do employers do when they discover a trusted employee with his hand in the till and find that he has been robbing them blind for months? How do you treat a friend who has been talking behind your back? How does a wife feel at the first shock of the news that her husband has been unfaithful to her? I know how some people react to situations like these. They exercise justice. Children who lie have their privileges taken away. Embezzling employees are fined or sent to jail. Friends who turn into malicious gossips are crossed off the list. Adultery is grounds for divorce. God could have treated man in the same way. He could have said, Let us give man just what he deserves. Let us turn our back on him and let him go to hell. Let us blow it all up and start all over again. If God were human, He would have found some way to even the score. Human beings look for ways to get even, because this is justice.

When God's Son came, He made no attempt to justify or excuse the ways of God with men. He did tell us, and demonstrated by His life and death, who God is and what God is like. In His own life and in His teaching, Jesus Christ made it clear that God does not look upon justice as the only means of accomplishing His

own ends. This does not mean that God's justice is imperfect. It is altogether perfect even though it may not always seem so to us. To us it seems just and right to love those who love us and to hate those who hate us - to do favors for those wh are willing to do favors for us and to get even with those who have offended us. This is justice in our language. But this is not God's language. Listen to what Christ has to say: If ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? Do not eve the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

Our Father in heaven is perfect because His justice is matched by His lov God loves in a manner beyond our comprehension. The just God is merciful, long-suffering, and of great patience. He makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. He is God, and the fact that we misunderstand or complain only proves that we are men and not God. If you or I wer God, we probably would come down hard on justice - our kind of justice. How would things be with us and with our world, however, if God were merely impartial and fair - if He gave us just what we deserve? If God were like us, there would be no angel song at Christmastime and no Good News from the side of heaven: Fear not, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people; for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. If God were fair - just that and nothing more - there would be no father running out to meet the prodigal, welcoming him back into the household after he had squandered the father's substance in a far country. If God were like us, the door would be firmly and finally shut.

God is just: The wages of sin is still death. But God is also love. And His infinite wisdom found a way to reconcile His justice with His love. Out of the great love of His Father-heart, the great God spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all. All of the wrath and fury of His justice zeroed itself in on Christ, when He suffered the agonies of hell in our place. God make Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.

Because Christ loved us, He gave Himself for us and became obedient unto death, eve the death of the Cross. By His living and loving and dying, Christ did for us what we could not do for ourselves and offers to every man what he cannot earn for himself - forgiveness and eternal life. God is not only fair, He is forgiving. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us. He remembers our sins no more. God forgives and He forgets!

Once a man knows - really knows - the love of God in Christ Jesus, he wil be ready to forgive as he has been forgiven. In today's Gospel Christ tells a dramatic story about a servant who had been discovered in the embezzlement of ten million dollars. According to the historian Josephus, the entire revenue of King Herod the Great for a whole year was less than one tenth of that amount. In other words, the servant could not possible repay what he owed. When the king ordered him and his whole family to be sold into slavery, the servant begged for mercy: Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything. In response to his pleading, the king was moved to pity. In an amazing demonstration of mercy he forgave the entire debt. Yet, on his way home to tell his family the good news, this same man came across one of his fellow servants who owed him a piddling amount of about $20.00. Seizing him by the throat, he demanded: Pay me what you owe. The debtor pleaded, but to no avail and was thrown into jail until he could pay his debt. With deliberate exaggeration, Christ dramatizes the position of one who has been forgiven by God and refuses to forgive others. To underline the point, Christ added: So also My heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart. If you pray, Forgive us our trespasses, and are not willing to forgive those who trespass against you, you forfeit God's forgiveness. 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.

Our God is a great God. By forgiving He leads us on to higher and holier things - fellowship with Him and with one another. To be forgiven by God is to be renewed in heart and spirit. Forgiveness, truly sought and truly received, changes

all of life. It provides clean, fresh air for our work and play and sleep. This may not be our way - but it is God's way: to accept the unacceptable, to forgive the unforgivable, and to love the unlovable. In Christ you can find the power to do the impossible: to bless them that curse you, to pray for those who treat you badly, to love your enemies. Amen.