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C O P Y

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St. James' Episcopal Church  
865 Madison Avenue  
New York City)

Sermon: Second Sunday after Easter  
April 12, 1964

ALAN PATON'S PLAY: "SPONONO", A STUDY IN THE CONTRARY CLAIMS OF FORGIVENESS  
AND DISCIPLINE.

Text: Romans 11: "Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God. And who has known the mind of the Lord? How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out."

We have celebrated the death and the resurrection of Christ, the Savior's sacrifice and his dying words: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do". Through these acts, he redeems us from our sins and by His mighty resurrection his influence is spread through the world.

The fact remains that in our time many people have barely emerged from barbarism and savagery into the demands of civilization; and especially in our vast cities, with many million more reverting back to barbarism. How can these redeeming forces be brought to bear on our society and how can human beings assess the true proportion of mercy to justice; of kindness, to the discipline that develops character?

It seems to me that it is to this question one of the most brilliant authors of our time, Alan Paton, addressed himself in the play: SPONONO, ably presented by a cast of twenty-five Africans and one white man, produced by Mrs. William K. Frank, a member of this congregation now playing at the Cort Theatre. The production is full of colorful revelations of the vitalities and charm of these native peoples from the Bantu land, especially in the final act with their gay colored feathers and native costumes and native exuberance.

## I

Without solving it or being able to, the purpose is serious - to try to explore the possibility of redeeming the tragic process of bad and broken homes that are breeding in the slums of our city as they are in countries all over the world. There is compounded in them a conflict of good and evil forces within them and for many the evil forces seem to be the more predominant and potent.

The author of "Cry The Beloved Country" has given to the world that which is still the most eloquent plaint on behalf of perceiving the black man's present predicament, and the long injustices meted out to him by white civilizations and the poignancy of the problems that are aggravated by this.

I suppose most people approached this play, SPONONO, expecting to find it mainly concerned with racial relations but as the author has insisted himself it is not a play of reference to racial matters, but rather to the universal human problem. Nonetheless everyone today feels so acutely the racial tensions that one is bound to perceive in it overtones, shadows of that conflict.

## II

I have made this the subject of a sermon because forgiveness is a cardinal and fundamental Christian doctrine. And yet from the very day that Christ enjoined us to forgive our brethren until seventy times seven, and to be merciful as the heavenly father is merciful, the best Christian minds have been baffled by attempts to perceive the inherent relationship between justice and mercy, between forgiveness and the disciplines that are requisite in life.

Alan Paton has conceived this play out of his experience long ago as head of a reformatory for delinquent black boys. The leading character with an unpronounceable name, who takes the role of Sponono is an able actor whose forebears until very recently were tribesmen and warriors, gives a magnificent representation of a high spirited youth with an engaging and appealing emotional nature responding to love, yet long torn asunder by the appeal of his violent impulses and prone to get into one trouble after another, making himself a problem to his principal.

He was from a home in which the father abandoned the mother and left her with the children. We watch Sponono make one promise after another to the principal that he will make good in return for the restoration of his badge and being kept on his job, working on the principal's grounds. We see him let down by his promises and do terrible things to others.

Sponono has gotten hold of the Christian doctrine of forgiveness and expects to find it meted out to him and is baffled when it isn't. The principal expresses his own personal disposition towards forgiveness and forgiving him but insists that there are consequences of evil doing that must be borne.

## II B

There is a much more thoroughly evil chap in the reformatory named Walter with whom Sponono gets into a bitter fight. Walter uses his heavy buckle on his big belt and injures Sponono's eye. Soon Sponono is pleading with the principal to forgive him. The principal has decreed that Walter cannot participate in sports for six months. "But, Meneer," says Sponono, "I have forgiven him". The principal says: "That was generous of you, Sponono, but your forgiveness is between you and him, between him and me is another matter". Sponono: "You should find it easier to forgive him, Meneer. It was my eye that was hurt, not yours". The principal had to instruct him: "Sponono, you may forgive a person and I may forgive him also but he may still have to bear the consequences of his act. Do you think when a person is forgiven, the whole thing is wiped out as if it had never happened?" Sponono: (naively) "Yes". "Meneer, Meneer, what good is it to forgive a person if you mean to punish him afterwards. This is not forgiveness, Meneer".

The principal was unaffected and ruled that the penalty went on and the problem remained. Perhaps Walter might have profited by sterner treatment because ultimately he is found guilty of the most foul murder of a young man in the reformatory who was about to be married to a lovely young girl, to whom both Walter and Sponono have taken a shine also, and the evil tendency in Walter was certainly not redeemed by the measure of forgiveness that he had received.

In another conversation the principal asked Sponono: "What made you forgive him?" Sponono replies: "It's the teaching of Jesus, Meneer. Jesus taught that we must forgive those who sin against us, even to seventy times seven". The principal asks: "Are you a Christian?" "No, Meneer, I am not good enough but I like to obey the commandments".

## III

A delightful elderly couple come to visit the reformatory just before Christmas and reveal that they have a wad of money for the Christmas celebration. And, alas, Sponono's temptation gets the best of him and he steals the wad. And later, he so ingratiates himself with the elderly woman that she is ready to forgive him.

Again Sponono can't understand why the principal won't let him off scot free of any consequences. The principal representing the long tradition of the white man's sense of administering justice and discipline in schools, felt so deeply that it would not be good for Sponono to be wholly let off.

IV

Now the play begins to gather momentum and to arise to terrific climaxes. We see the lovely romance of a beautiful young girl, Elizabeth and Spike, with his dark forebodings that somehow fate will intervene before his wedding day smashed by the evil in Walter. When the foul murder of Spike comes, Sponono is under suspicion. He is driven out into the darkness and seeks asylum with Elizabeth. He has a desperate need of love, and for someone to so love him that he is given complete confidence. Yet the practical realistic streak in Elizabeth caused to break him down by telling him the truth that he cannot bear to hear. "You'd promise anything, and you'd do nothing. You never will". Sponono replies: "Don't say it. Haven't I told you before never to say it?" Elizabeth is almost in despair about him and says: "You don't want to be saved. You want to be lost".

In the play there is a character, Mr. Mabaso, ever near at hand. A fine looking African with a beard who stands beside the headmaster and is always the voice of reason and common sense, with a strictly moral view of the matter. Obviously in the mind of Mr. Alan Faton this attitude will not prove helpful in the long run and ultimately Elizabeth through her courage and plain spokenness perhaps brings down a disaster upon herself by being more frank and outspoken with Sponono than he can take. She says to him in a passionate scene when he has broken out of the reformatory by threatening everyone at gunpoint and is still under suspicion of murder, a hunted man, when he suggests to her that they have each lost everything that she has lost her lover and he his refuge in his reformatory that they run off together, she looks at him and says: "Why should I accept your promises? You haven't been true to anyone in your whole life. You weren't even true to the one who needed you most, your own mother. You always were a good for nothing. Get out of here". She told him of her dream, a man who would stand by his wife and help provide for their children. That was what she was looking for.

These severe remarks put Sponono in a frenzy. He becomes a prey to the passions of his lust for her and sadistic feelings of the moment and apparently goes berserk, and in the darkness one gathers the impression of forcible rape, and that all is lost in calamity.

What does there remain for Sponono now? What are his hopes? He is taken back by the police to the reformatory but there is no principal there. The principal was the main man in his life. When the principal smiled at him and accepted him, he felt that he was safe. He asks: "Where is Meneer?" He was told: "You're too late. He's gone. Left us". Sponono asks why: "Because of you, Sponono". This, I think, is the first thing that penetrates his moral consciousness and brings him to some sense of repentance.

V

In the colorful last scene there is a tribalistic orgy and mock trial in which Sponono takes over as the judge. The principal is brought to stand at the dock to endure judgment. This is a clever device for as we remember from our school days, those who were our judges also were under judgment from us, and that will ever be with boys and girls.

Here is revealed all their inner resistance to the great Anglo-Saxon tradition of justice, by reason of their addiction to tribal mores. There are mighty cheers and dances whenever justice is mocked and distorted in favor of Sponono. The principal is made to hear the worst of what they think of him. "You see, he knows the words, it's the meaning he didn't know." "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, is what he wanted." (Heidigger -)

Our prison chaplains find that those who are punished or condemned are always apt to be suspicious that there is something vindictive in the judge, however impartial and devoted to constructive discipline to bring out the best in us a judge may be.

## VI

This is the real dilemma in the cultivation of character by those in authority, parents or whatever. If you love too much and deal too generously does it not soften them, or if you are too severe they find you therefore cold, are you not in danger of plunging them into despair and desperate courses.

There remains in my mind this remark of Elizabeth in retrospect as to whether she was right in advising Spike so strongly not to take a knife with him on the night that he was so brutally murdered. She thought that it was less dangerous for him to go unarmed so he would not be provoked to violence. She admits that there are two ways and that both ways are dangerous. But we choose the way that we think is best.

So it is with having to administer justice or discipline. Paton is sensitive to the predicaments that we are in right at the moment, that whatever we have been doing has not been working out adequately; Violence, and crime and brutality are apparently abounding and increasing. There are terrible suspicions that exist between the racial groups. This mock trial condemns the principal by its own crude and distorted canons of justice. Yet those who are conducting the trial are already themselves condemned.

Has it been that we are not taking seriously enough Jesus' open ended instruction of free forgiveness and going beyond all human expectations to try to eradicate the consequences. Or have we been soft when it was more comfortable to be soft and lenient.

There is increasing debate about capital punishment, the treatment of criminals, regarding them as psychiatric cases rather than as moral derelicts and dangerous enemies of society. The old time penal systems in administering justice to vast conglomerations of people has been found unsatisfactory by those who were under it. How control violence in Congo and elsewhere that has grown up in the raw new countries where people who play the great roles have hardly emerged from savagery.

## VII

One of the high spots of the drama is watching people being inwardly torn apart inside. As the play says: No man is utterly bad and guilty of sins which cannot be forgiven. How can the better angels of human nature be more encouraged and how can we better command to this generation a more vigorous search for self-control? This has to do with the morality on our campuses, with every factor of modern life in the supposedly upper strata of society.

In the finest characters that I have known there has been a fine tempering of St. Paul's paradox: "Behold the goodness and severity of God." the mysterious blendings in the workings of a mind that has a sense of justice and also a generous heart and nature that is great enough to forgive. For we do sense that there is a solution of the dilemma in the revelation of God's ways with men. Surely He has not made the conditions of human life soft - witness Alaska. His son had us take up the Cross and follow. Jesus saves - but our salvation involves following Him on our own feet. Yet this same Jesus revealed that God's mercy and forgiveness is immeasurable and unfathomable.

May I end on this rather pessimistic note that we have not found the formula or explored the problem to its ultimate. Again, Mr. Paton has given us the incentive to think and Mrs. Frank's superlative production with these engaging and able actors from that vigorous majority of the population in South Africa that are so unjustly excluded from privilege. Their colorful African music and emotional ways allow a highly dramatic treatment of a vitally important theme.

So we might put St. Paul's covenant in inverted order. "Behold therefore the severity and goodness of God".