

. . .As We Forgive

sermon digest

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Matthew 6:5-15; Ephesians 4:31-5:2

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A demented man Charles Carl Roberts invaded a small Amish school in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, on October 2, 2006. An hour of unthinkable horror resulted in the deaths of five children and the critical injury of five others before the gunman took his own life. Yet, the breaking news was nearly eclipsed by the immediate response of the Amish community. These simple folk, often ridiculed because of their peculiar ways and strange dress, exhibited a spirit of forgiveness that left the world in shock. On the same day of the shooting CNN News interviewed one of the Brethren from a neighboring area. Jack Meyer explained that the people were just trying to follow Jesus' teachings in dealing with the terrible hurt. He said, "I don't think there's anybody here that wants to do anything but forgive and not only reach out to those who have suffered a loss in that way but to reach out to the family of the man who committed these acts."

One columnist wrote: "Yesterday on NBC News, I saw an Amish midwife who had helped birth several of the girls murdered by the killer say that they were planning to take food over to his family's house. She said—and I paraphrase closely—"This is possible if you have Christ in your heart." An Amish man was seen holding and comforting the sobbing father of the killer. Although the Roberts' are not Amish, the Amish community set up a fund to help the family. The widow Marie Roberts wrote a public letter: "Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. Gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you."

Genuine forgiveness is not easy. I could end the sermon here with, "go and do likewise," but I know that it is not so simple. Within the family, we have to maintain a spirit of forgiveness toward one another over the small matters that irritate and offend. People who love one another do have to say, "I am sorry," over the daily little stuff. But that does not seem to run on the same level as the horror of the Amish families. Let's face it. All of us maintain a hierarchy of crime. A wife may easily dismiss a comment from her husband about an old girlfriend, but a violation of the marriage vow in an affair is another matter. Parents may absorb the indiscretion of a child who stays out too late, but getting drunk and wrecking the car is another matter.

How does one ever come to terms with the murder of a child? The Anabaptist movement is the story of persecution, mostly from other Christians. For nearly five centuries these people have found the center of their faith in a nonviolent lifestyle. Unlike Christians who debate and dismiss the irrational ethic of Jesus that calls us to love enemies, the Amish are part of a movement that has always taken the Sermon on the Mount both seriously and literally.

A common experience of worship in our church is praying together the Lord's Prayer, the "Our Father." In another congregation, I had a staff minister who complained that including the Prayer in every service was a meaningless ritual. For people who mumble empty phrases as a reflex action, he was right. Indeed any part of our liturgy can become meaningless ritual. However, we should not dismiss the people who offer the Prayer to God. Growing up in a church that denounced liturgical, copied or written prayers in favor of extemporaneous, personal prayers, I discovered that we were not immune from rattling empty, repetitive phrases. At the center of the Prayer, churches divide over the traditional translation "trespasses" or the more accurate word "debts." The difference in meaning is minor; but the contingency, "as we forgive" is radical. Later translations have also shifted from the present to past perfect tense, "as we have forgiven," following the earlier teaching of Jesus in 5:24, "first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." The only commentary on the Prayer in Matthew focuses on the inseparable connection between forgiving others and being forgiven by God. If the past perfect tense is correct, our forgiveness toward others has happened before turning to God for forgiving grace.

I sometimes envy the simplicity of the Amish. The command to love the enemy is a simple expectation of their culture. At the same time, we should not assume that they avoid the struggle. My friend, who taught in a Mennonite seminary and ministered in Mennonite churches, once said to me that they were experts in passive-aggressive behavior. I recall the comment of Henlee Barnett about a very kind and gentle professor who brought his students down to their knees with his exams. Barnett rightly observed that the demonic is manifest in all of us. The young teen in the TV sitcom who says, "OK," to adults while doing as he pleases reminds me of the way we learn to dismiss demands of the gospel that are difficult.

I wonder, would the situation have been different if Roberts had survived to stand trial? Does the fact of mental illness make forgiveness easier? I don't recall any media interview of parents of the children who were killed or injured in the attack. Was the community acting in behalf of the people at the center of the horrible event, insulating their agony from public view? Were the acts of kindness towards the Roberts family and words of forgiveness toward the gunman genuine expressions of the heart or dutiful acts of obedience to legal requirements of the gospel? Does any of that matter?

I have finally come to accept the reality of self-service in forgiveness. Carrying a grudge and hatred toward an offender is

a terrible burden on the victim. The ultimate objective in the process of forgiveness is a self-serving release from that burden. Somehow, the message, do it for yourself, does not sound the same note that I hear in the gospel.

Do we really know what it means to forgive as God forgives? Jesus called disciples to a lifestyle of forgiveness, but he also stood with the Prophets in demanding justice. Declaring an evil act forgiven does not accomplish the removal of that act from history. In Pennsylvania, the children who died remain dead, and the physical and emotional scars remain with the survivors. One might even complain that the simple dismissal of a crime does not hold others to the same standard to which we are held by a just and holy God. "Gentle Jesus Meek and Mild," hardly fits the righteous indignation expressed in the Gospels toward the Pharisees or the money changers in the Temple. Jesus was capable of anger. Some have noted that Jesus acted in defense of the defenseless but not in defense of himself. He also seemed to hold religious people to a higher standard that allowed some room for ignorance from people who were unfamiliar with the Law of God. In Romans, Paul argues for the same standard of responsibility before God for Jews and Gentiles. All of us are without excuse.

In *Word and World*, (Vol 27, No 1, p 79ff) Lori Hale discovered a turning point in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's work in which he shifted emphasis from *loving enemies* to *acting responsibly*. Until 1939, the German theologian seemed to hold onto hope for reconciliation between the nations and preached forgiveness and love as the gospel answer to Hitler. The attack on Jews *Krystallnacht* in 1938 and his visit to the U.S. were the turning point. In 1939, Bonhoeffer began to shift his emphasis from idealistic reconciliation to realistic justice. He began to provide secret information to the Allies and finally participated in the plot to assassinate Hitler. The German pastor did not reject the ideal of loving enemies or forgiveness, but he seemed to recognize that forgiveness and justice must stand in balance in the real world, and he seemed to be resigned to forgiveness as a stage in the process of reconciliation.

Miroslav Volf, a native of Croatia and a student of Jürgen Moltmann, tells the story. After a lecture, Moltmann, his mentor, stood and asked, "But can you embrace a *četnik*?" These were the militants who were carrying out a mission of ethnic cleansing, raping women, burning churches, herding people into concentration camps, destroying entire cities. Volf said to his teacher, "No, I cannot—but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to." He then wrote one of the more profound discussions of forgiveness in publication, *Exclusion & Embrace*. The objective of forgiveness is reconciliation, *Embrace*. The word for the alienation that destroys community is *Exclusion*.

Embrace is what happens when the process of forgiveness is accomplished. Volf takes the cross of Christ is a picture of a welcoming God with outstretched arms and declares that there was a cross in the heart of God long before the crucifixion of Jesus. Then he describes the drama of embrace: *first*, opening the arms to another in a gesture of invitation creating space within oneself for the other; *second*, waiting for response allowing the other to join in the movement together; *third*, closing the arms around one another gently, recognizing that you remain two free individuals; *fourth*, opening the arms to let go of the other and of the offense that drove you apart.

What do you expect of a loving Father at the return of the wayward son? Then, what should we expect from one another? People of God live by the ideal: "Be kind to one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."