



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

Pastor's Update

Mike Housholder & Merv Thompson, Editors

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

"Grace and peace to you from the God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

The entire nation was sickened and saddened by the infamous and senseless shooting and killing of the Amish schoolchildren in Pennsylvania. Of course we are appalled by all school shootings. Near my home in Minnesota we have had some of the worst. But the Amish horror has seemed to resonate on a deep and profound emotional level with many of us, in some ways much like Columbine did.

It is just inconceivable to imagine how anyone could be so hate-filled and vindictive and indeed evil to take the life of such precious and innocent little girls. To try and link this to some perceived or real trauma in his earlier life is simply an exercise in futility. No prior hurt, no former abuse, no betrayal or abandonment or pathological leanings can possibly explain such a horrific and demonic act.

Most of us before this tragedy did not have a very informed awareness of the Amish and their beliefs. We are often limited to catching glimpses of their rather quaint, picture-perfect dress and their nostalgic-inducing black horse-drawn carriages. In some cases we have been closer to them when they are involved in commerce, selling their manufactured or grown products, but at other times we hardly even notice them. Most of us are not even clear about their theology, their worship, or their history. The primary thing we know is that they want to be separated from the rest of the world. They reject most things modern and technological (thus no phone at the school).

But we have learned far more about them in the past weeks than we ever knew before. By far the most poignant realization about the Amish has been played out again and again during this tragedy, that of being inculcated with a pervasive sense of forgiveness. We had some vague notions the Amish community was non-violent (who can forget the vivid scene in the movie "The Witness" where Harrison Ford, masquerading as an Amish, suddenly strikes back at the local town bully), but we had no inkling forgiveness was such a powerful force among them.

Of all of the images which have circulated among the press in recent weeks confirming this preponderance of forgiveness took place at the funeral of the killer of the girls, 32-year-old milk truck driver, Charles Carl Roberts. Absolutely shocking all outside observers, half of the 75 mourners at the funeral service were Amish neighbors and friends, coming to support the widow and three children and to indicate they also were forgiving the killer.

These were the same people who had lost daughters, granddaughters, nieces, neighbors and close members of their community, but there they were. Hardened and cynical reporters admitted that such an event caused even some of them to shed a tear or two, truly moved by this unconditional expression of love and grace.

Some of the media reports included the following, "Forgiveness is often difficult, in this case it seems almost unfathomable." "It seems much easier for us to hold onto rage and resentment, sometimes even for the lifetime, rather than forgive." One writer suggested that "forgiving doesn't mean condoning, it doesn't mean that everything becomes all right or that brokenness goes away."

Rabbi Irwin Kula is quoted as saying, "*Forgiveness requires us to admit the pain, the devastation, admit the brokenness it causes in us and to make a decision not to put it in a place inside of us that will be toxic.*" And someone named Iris Murdoch asserts, "*A saint is someone who absorbs the evil around them without passing it on.*" An anonymous writer also says, "*forgiveness is every bit as hard as we think it is, but if we don't have any practice, it is almost impossible.*"

What came through in the Amish ordeal is that they had gone through the extensive, life-long practice of forgiveness, and so in this darkest of hours they could go back to what got them there, a forgiving and loving heart.

One vital ingredient to this whole story which, not surprisingly, the secular media did not pursue, was the reason why the Amish are so committed to forgiveness. When asked about this absolute commitment to forgiveness, where it came from, the leader said simply, *"We forgive because of Jesus. We forgive because we believe and follow Jesus."* Of course. That's it. That is the reason why we also forgive, it is because of Jesus Christ. For Jesus not only taught us about forgiveness, he practiced, lived it, even died with it on his lips, *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

I am sure the Amish spokesman would have referred the interviewer right away to the seminal words in Matthew 18, when Peter asked Jesus how many times a person should forgive. The law said three times, but Peter doubled that and added another, so he asked, seven times? Should we forgive one another seven times? Seven, the perfect number in the Scriptures, designating wholeness and completeness. Seven sounded so right, so magnanimous. But then Jesus popped Peter's bubble when he replied, *"I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven."*

Also in Matthew 18 is a fascinating, and at the same time, disturbing story. It is about a man who owed his king several million dollars, far beyond his ability to repay. The king is unhappy, to say the least, then threatens to put this man and his whole family into prison. But when the man pleads for mercy, for forgiveness, suddenly without warning the king gives what he asks. The entire debt is cancelled, he is forgiven, restored, made whole. Unconditional love overflows here from the king, who of course is God.

But then when the newly released man walks out of the palace, the first person he runs into is someone who owes him a few dollars, a mere pittance. He demands the debt be paid on the spot. When the man says he does not have the money, he needs more time to secure it, the unmerciful servant turns on him and has him thrown into jail. We might be horrified at this man's lack of grace, but then of course the parable is speaking directly to us.

God through Jesus Christ has forgiven us this huge load in our lives, this sin and guilt and pain and greed that comes with being human. But often just after we have been forgiven of this enormous weight, we simply refuse to forgive those around us, often for the most mundane of reasons. The end of the story is

instructive, now the king will take this unmerciful man and cast him into the outer darkness, where he may never find his way back.

The Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16 is one of the visual and effective instances of teaching about the centrality of forgiveness. Once a year the priests would call all of the people together. He would then take two goats, or lambs, and put them right in the center of the community. These would become scapegoats, or sacrificial lambs. One of the animals was quickly sacrificed on the altar, the way they did things in those days (there is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood).

But the other animal became the figurative repository of all of the sin and guilt in the community. People were asked to transfer their own "stuff" onto the back of the goat or sheep. Then the priest would take this animal and lead it out into the desert. The visual confirmation of forgiveness was palpable. People would respond, *"there goes my sin, there it goes, gone forever"* as they watched the procession cross the nearest hill. You can almost see the Psalmist remembering the Day of Atonement when he wrote, *"as far as the east is from the west, so far does the Lord remove our transgressions from us."* Later on Jesus would become the scapegoat and the Lamb of God who takes the sin of the world.

Also we should remember that forgiveness often helps the one doing the forgiving even more than the object of that forgiveness. The more we hold onto pain, anger, or hurt the more we punish ourselves rather than the one who helped cause this situation.

The lesson of the Amish should not be lost on the rest of the Christian church, which so often demonstrates more ungrace than grace. The reason the Amish forgive like this is because of Jesus Christ. This is also our motivation for forgiving, because we have first been saved, forgiven, loved, graced, and then we can pass this on to others.

God is working for good in all things, even through this tragedy. He did not cause it, but he continues to bring hope and healing to those affected by it. And God is working through the power of forgiveness, through the Amish, through Lutheran Church of Hope, through each of us.