

Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy

On Monday morning, October 2, 2006, a gunman, Charles Roberts, entered a one-room Amish school in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. In front of twenty-five horrified pupils, thirty-two-year-old Roberts ordered the boys and the teacher to leave. Before it was over, Roberts had shot and killed five and left others critically wounded before shooting and killing himself as police stormed the building. The story captured the attention of broadcast and print media in the United States and around the world. By Tuesday morning some fifty television crews had clogged the small village of Nickel Mines, staying for five days until the killer and the killed were buried. The blood was barely dry on the schoolhouse floor when Amish parents brought words of forgiveness to the family of the one who had slain their children.

It seems like today everyone, including Christians and so-called Christians, wants justice. How many times in the news have we seen people pleading for someone to “have to pay” for their crimes or saying that they won’t rest until the perpetrator “burns in hell”.

But the Amish families affected by this horrible tragedy, reacted in a way that to the outside world was incredulous. That such forgiveness could be offered so quickly for such a heinous crime was foreign to most of us. Of the hundreds of media queries that the authors received about the shooting, questions about forgiveness rose to the top. Forgiveness, in fact, eclipsed the tragic story, trumping the violence and arresting the world's attention.

[Within a week of the murders, Amish forgiveness was a central theme in more than 2,400 news stories around the world. The Washington Post, The New York Times, USA Today, Newsweek, NBC Nightly News, CBS Morning News, Larry King Live, Fox News, Oprah, and dozens of other media outlets heralded the forgiving Amish. Three weeks after the shooting, "Amish forgiveness" had appeared in 2,900 news stories worldwide and on 534,000 web sites.]

Fresh from the funerals where they had buried their own children, grieving Amish families accounted for half of the seventy-five people who attended the killer's burial. Roberts' widow was deeply moved by their presence as Amish families greeted her and her three children. The forgiveness went beyond talk and graveside presence: the Amish also supported a fund for the shooter's family.

A few years later a book called “Amish Grace” came out about the tragedy and the way the Amish had reacted. I was curious to understand how and why they had behaved so

differently than how I'd seen other "Christians" react when they were victims of violent crime so I read the book. I was curious to understand how and why they had behaved so differently than how I'd seen other "Christians" react when they were victims of violent crime. It was a refreshing look into the lives of the Christian Amish who reacted so differently to this tragedy.

In this book I learned that the Amish believe strongly that if you do not forgive, then God will not forgive you! Period! No exceptions! This was hard for me to grasp. I knew that the Lord's prayer mentions forgiveness and debts.

We all know the Lord's Prayer from Matthew 6: 9-13 (KJV)

[Mat 6:9-13 KJV] 9 After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. 10 Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as [it is] in heaven. 11 Give us this day our daily bread. 12 And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

But if you continue Matthew 6 with the 2 verses immediately following the Lord's Prayer, Jesus states in verses 14 and 15:

[Mat 6:14-15 ESV] 14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

WOW! I was a fairly new Christian at this time and these two verses, especially verse 15: "but if you DO NOT forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive you your trespasses." really hit me hard. How had I missed this? It was implied in the Lord's prayer, but Jesus really brought it home in verses 14 and 15.

This was a huge time of growth for me as a Christian. My relationships changed dramatically. I began to realize that my relationships and attitude with others should reflect God's relationship and attitude towards me. I began to no longer dwell on hurts that loved ones might have caused. I began to be less bothered by people who pulled out in front of me in traffic, and the list goes on.

Let's pray:

Lord, help our actions as your followers to always leave the world incredulous. Help us to be your witnesses and help us to truly forgive others as you have so graciously forgiven us.

Amen