

A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, World Communion Sunday, October 7, 2007, dedicated to the honor of William Willis, Sr. on the occasion of his 86<sup>th</sup> Birthday and the retiring of #99 by OSU and always to the glory of God!

**“Forgiveness and Faith”**  
**I Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:1-10**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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This week as I was preparing to preach on “Forgiveness and Faith” in Luke’s 17<sup>th</sup> chapter, I bought a book entitled *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* by Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, David L. Weaver-Zercher. It tells the story of the Amish community in Nickels Mines, PA, which suffered so greatly one year ago. On Tuesday, October 2, Dr. Kraybill wrote a piece entitled, “Why the Amish Forgive So Quickly,” which was published by *The Christian Science Monitor*. It is so profound. I can do no other than share it with you. Dr. Kraybill writes:

*One year ago today, a shooter entered a one-room Amish school in Nickel Mines, PA., dismissed all but 10 girls and fired at them execution-style, killing five before shooting himself.*

*Within hours, the Amish community forgave the killer and his family. News of the instant forgiveness stunned the outside world – almost as much as the incident itself did. Many pundits lauded the Amish, but others worried that hasty forgiveness was emotionally unhealthy.*

*In dozens of interviews with Amish people since the tragedy, I discovered that the Amish approach to forgiveness is indeed quick and unconventional – but also inspirational to the rest of us.*

*Members of the Amish community began offering words and hugs of forgiveness when the blood was barely dry on the schoolhouse floor. A grandmother laughed when I asked if the forgiveness was orchestrated. “You mean that some people actually thought we had a meeting to plan forgiveness?”*

*As the father of a slain daughter explained, “Our forgiveness was not our words, it was what we did.” Members of the community visited the gunman’s widow at her home with food and flowers and hugged members of his family. There were a few words, but it was primarily their hugs, gifts and mere presence (acts of grace ) that communicated Amish forgiveness. Of the 75 people at the killer’s burial, about half were Amish, including parents who had buried their own children a day or so before. Amish people also contributed to a fund for the shooter’s family.*

*For most people, a decision to forgive comes – if ever – at the end of a long emotional journey that may stretch over months if not years. The Amish invert the process. Their religious tradition predisposes them to forgive even before an injustice occurs.*

*Amish faith is grounded in the teachings of Jesus to love enemies, reject revenge and leave vengeance in the hands of God. As a father who lost a daughter in the schoolhouse said, “Forgiveness means giving up the right to revenge.”*

*Unlike those who hire lawyers at every turn to protect their rights, the Amish yield to divine providence in the case of an unspeakable tragedy such as the one at Nickel Mines – believing that God’s long arm of justice removes that need for human retaliation.*

*In the Amish view, forgiveness is a religious duty. As a young Amish carpenter said, “It’s just standard forgiveness,” but he was wrong. Conventional Christian forgiveness posits a God who forgives sinners and urges them to forgive others – to pass the grace on to those who wrong them. The Amish refrain – “If we don’t forgive, we won’t be forgiven” – shows a different impetus. Their salvation hinges on their willingness to forgive, a powerful motivation to extend grace to others. They cite the Lord’s Prayer, and Jesus’ story about an unforgiving servant as their motivation. One bishop, pointing to verses following the Lord’s Prayer, said emphatically, “Forgiveness is the only thing that Jesus underscored in the Lord’s Prayer.”*

*“Forgiveness was a decided issue,” one bishop explained. Decided, that is, by Amish history and practice over the centuries. When the religious ancestors of the Amish were torched at the stake for their faith in 16th-century Europe, many of them, echoing Jesus on the cross, prayed aloud that God would forgive their executioners.*

*Despite their front-loaded commitment, the Amish still find forgiveness to be a long emotional process. Though there were no expressions of outright rage or hopes that the gunman would burn in hell, the wanton slaughter of their children did bring deep pain, tears and raw grief.*

*While forgiveness means not holding a grudge – “the acid of bitterness eats the container that holds it,” one farmer explained – the Amish are clear that it does not free the offender from punishment. Had the gunman survived, they would have wanted him locked up, not for revenge but to protect other children.*

*In mainstream society, retribution is a taken-for-granted right. Around the world, names of deities are often invoked to fuel cycles of revenge generation after generation.*

*In refreshing contrast, rather than using religion to bless and legitimize revenge, the Amish believe that God smiles on acts of grace that open doors for reconciliation. ( Donald B. Kraybill, distinguished professor*

at Elizabethtown College, is co-author of the book, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy*).

II Timothy 1:1ff reminds us that the faith we have has been passed down by a culture of Christians as well. For most of us our culture includes our family and our church family. From them we have learned courage and strength. We have witnessed grace and love. They have been a great cloud of witnesses - and they join us at the table of Christ's grace today.

As we come to the table, we are also joined worldwide by Amish and Mennonites whose faith in Jesus Christ calls them to nonviolence and unconditional forgiveness. As they teach us "quick forgiveness" and demonstrate rock solid faith, we give thanks to God. We are joined by Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants, Evangelicals and Pentecostals who teach as well. From these glorious expressions of Christian faith, which all of us are tied in some way by faith's strong chord, we learn the power of ritual, the beauty of ancient language and incense rising to heaven, the joy of faith, the grace of God, the fullness of love in Christ, the power of justice, and the presence of the Holy Spirit and the spirit's life and action in community.

Today, at Christ's table of grace, we are joined by all who call Jesus, "Lord." We are joined by all whom Jesus calls, "friend, servant, steward." As we come to the table, I pray that whatever it is that holds us back from faith in Jesus, whatever it is that holds us back from forgiveness of those who have transgressed us or our loved ones, whatever it is that keeps us from moving on with our lives from the mud, muck and mire of our unhappiness and hate, I pray that we lay it all at the foot of the table. We give it all to God.

Now is the time for release. Now is the time for letting go and letting God tune our hearts to love and praise. Now is the time to turn our hearts and minds to the reality of God's grace. Now, I ask

you to pause in silence to release your pain, your energy for anger, your hurts, your past unhappiness - no matter how long ago that past has been . . . .

Closing Prayer:

*God of all people and all the ages, who teaches us “quick forgiveness” in the faith of our Amish sisters and brothers, receive our hurts, our pain, our anger, our anguish and any unhappiness we bring to the table today. Through your healing power in Christ Jesus, turn all of this to hope, to love, to grace, to possibility, to promise. Amen.*