

*A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 17, 2008, dedicated to Robyn Hudepohl on her baptismal day, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Forgiven and Reconciled”**

### **Genesis 45, 1-15; Matthew 15, 21-28**

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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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Today’s readings from Genesis 45 and Matthew 15 teach valuable lessons about the issues of God’s mercy. As the climax to the story begun last Sunday in Genesis 37, Joseph acts with love and mercy toward his brothers who – so long ago – sold him into slavery in Canaan.

This story serves as a paradigm of what the grace of God can do in human life, transforming a curse into a blessing. In an atmosphere in which an entire family could be rejected and even executed, God, through Joseph, forgives, reconciles and moves on.

Further on in the Gospel of Matthew, the Canaanite

woman knows she is in need of healing. Jesus is in need of listening. When he listens to her, he is changed. Once he is changed, she is healed. She becomes a means of God's grace to Jesus, while Jesus extends God's mercy to her. Forgiven and moving on!

In Matthew 5:7, we read, ***“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.”*** At the heart of scripture is the heart of God. And the heart of God is merciful, forgiving and reconciling.

Twenty-two months ago, headlines from our neighbors in Southeast Pennsylvania started with these three words: *“Amish. School. Shooting.”* Never did we imagine that these three words would appear together. But the unimaginable turned real on October 2, 2006, when Charles Carl Roberts IV carried his guns and his rage into an Amish schoolhouse near Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania.

Five school girls died that day and five others were seriously wounded. Turning a tranquil schoolhouse into a house of horror, Roberts shattered a reassuring American myth that the Old Order Amish remain isolated from the problems of the larger world.

So begins the book *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* by Donald Kraybill, Steven Nolt and David Weaver-Zercher. The authors tell how the world was surprised by Amish grace as the Amish families victimized by Roberts, as well as the entire community, forgave the killer and expressed grace and love to his family.

In the book, the authors explain the difference between

grace and forgiveness.

*“Grace is the loving and compassionate response to others which comforts them, assist them in their need and sacrifices for another’s benefit. In the face of such tragedy, grace is impossible for most to grasp. Forgiveness is a particular form of grace that always involves the offense, the offender and a victim. When forgiveness happens, the victim forgoes the right to revenge and commits to overcoming bitter feelings toward the wrongdoer. Some take forgiveness a bit further - insisting that positive feelings toward the offender - feelings such as love and compassion - are essential to forgiveness.”*

For the Amish in Nickel Mine, the Sermon on the Mount is considered among the most important texts of scripture and forgiveness is at the very heart of Jesus’ gospel. The bishop of Nickel Mine told the authors, *“Forgiveness is all about Matthew 5, and the Sermon on the Mount and loving our enemies.”* (P.88). Amos, a young minister in the church said, *“When you start looking at the New Testament, forgiveness is everywhere . . . The Bible is all about forgiveness and mercy . . . God wants us to be merciful and loving.”* (*Ibid.*) Long after the tragedy that claimed innocent lives in Nickel Mine, this truth lives on.

I would like to tell you the episode at the Nickel Mines school ended the need for amazing grace in the face of murder and tragedy, but I cannot do that. On July 27, just three Sundays ago, in Knoxville, Tennessee, another gunman killed more innocent people – this time at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church, where about 200 people were in worship enjoying the church’s children presentation of *Annie*.

Church member Barbara Kemper said the gunman, Jim Adkisson, shouted "hateful words" before he opened fire, but police investigators said other witnesses didn't recall him saying anything. A burly usher, 60-year-old Greg McKendry, a retired professor, was hailed as a hero for shielding the children and others from gunfire as other church members rushed to wrestle the gunman to the ground. Police arrived at 10:21 a.m., three minutes after getting the 911 call, and arrested Adkisson. No children were hurt, but eight people were shot, including the two who died — McKendry and Linda Kraeger, 61.

Longtime acquaintance of Adkisson, Carol Smallwood, said, "*Jim is a loner who hates blacks, gays and anyone different from him.*" Adkisson left a letter in his SUV that police have not released, but in which "*he indicated . . . that he expected to be in there (the church) shooting people until the police arrived and that he fully expected to be killed by the responding police,*" said Sterling Owen, Knoxville police chief. "*He certainly intended to take a lot of casualties.*"

The Associated Press story continued three Mondays ago: The church's pastor, the Rev. Chris Buice, is a frequent contributor to the Knoxville newspaper. "*In the midst of political and religious controversy, I choose to love my neighbours as myself,*" Buice wrote in an op-ed piece published in March. "*Ultimately, I believe that tolerance, compassion and respect are the qualities we need to keep Knoxville and East Tennessee beautiful.*"

Amy Broyles had come to worship excited to see her daughter in the play. Having crawled to safety covering her

child, she later said: "*Adkisson was a man who was hurt in the world and feeling that nothing was going his way. . . . He turned the gun on people who were most likely to treat him lovingly and compassionately and be the ones to help someone in that situation.*"

Reflecting the spirit of Amish grace and God's mercy, Amy Broyles spoke words of love and kindness in the immediate face of terror and tragedy. Mercy and grace often abound in the face of terrible tragedy. A Franciscan priest, the Rev. Richard Rohr has written:

*Mercy is like the mystery of forgiveness. By definition, mercy and forgiveness are unearned, undeserved, and not owned. If you don't experience all three, then it is not the experience of mercy. If you think people have to be merciful or try to earn mercy then you have lost the mystery of mercy and forgiveness. **Mercy and forgiveness are the gospel in a nutshell.** (Found in Richard Rohr, *Jesus' Plan for a New World*, St. Anthony Press, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1996, p. 136).*

**Our God is a God of mercy and forgiveness.** Thus, this beatitude means exactly what it says. Those who are merciful, obtain the blessing of mercy in their lives as well.

Each of us needs mercy. Each of us needs to extend mercy to others. In fact, you don't know mercy until you have really needed it. Mercy is experienced as if it is collapsing into deeper nets of being enclosed by grace, after grace after grace. Writing on mercy, Rohr says:

*I once saw God's mercy as patient, benevolent tolerance,*

*a kind of grudging forgiveness. But now mercy has become for me God's very self-understanding, a loving allowing, a willing breaking of the rules by the One who made the rules – a wink and a smile, a firm and joyful taking of our hand while we clutch at our sins and gaze at God in desire and disbelief (Ibid.).*

Reinhold Neibuhr once said, “When I get to heaven, I pray that God will be more merciful to me than just.” In other words, we pray that the “Rule Maker” will look with kindness on us when we have been the rule breakers. Granting mercy is always ultimate entry into powerlessness. I say this because once we have been truly merciful, there is no retreat to judgment. Forgiveness can never be a half way covenant.

**Look at yourself.** *“Look at times you have withheld forgiveness. When you have withheld forgiveness, it has been your attempt to hold a claim over the one you won't forgive. It's the way we finally hold on to power, to seek the moral high ground over another person. I will hold onto unforgiveness and you will know it just by my coldness, by my not looking over there, by my refusal to smile, or whatever. Oh, we do it so subtly to maintain our sense of superiority. Non-forgiveness is a form of power over another person, a way to manipulate, shame, control, and diminish another. God in Jesus refuses to use such power.” (Rohr, Ibid., p. 137).*

Lewis Smedes writes in *The Art of Forgiving*:

*Forgiving is the only way to heal the wounds of a past we cannot change and cannot forget. Forgiving changes a bitter memory, a cowardly memory into a courageous memory, an enslaved memory into a free memory.*

*Forgiving restores a self-respect that someone killed. And more than anything else, forgiving gives birth to hope for the future after our past illusions have been shattered.*

*When we forgive, we bring in light where there was darkness. We summon positives to replace negatives. We open the door to an unseen future that our painful past had shut. When we forgive, we take God's hand, walk through the door, and stroll into the possibilities that wait for us to make them real. (Ballantine Books, 1996, p. 176)*

If we truly believe that Jesus is the revelation of what is going on inside of the eternal God, then we are forced to conclude from Joseph, Jesus and the beatitudes that God is humble and merciful. The God who can wipe us out, exhibits holy powerlessness by being merciful.

Be merciful as God is merciful. Whatever you are hanging onto against whomever you are lording it over, let it go. Surrender your will to God. Whether you come from Nickle Mines or Knoxville, Newark or New Philadelphia, you need to find ways to extend mercy and forgiveness in the face of trials, trauma or tragedy. Then, in the bountiful mercy of God, forgive, be reconciled, move on. Amen.

