

AMISH GRACE HOW FORGIVENESS TRANSCENDED TRAGEDY

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On October 2, 2006, in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, a 32 year old man went to a one room Amish school and took the students hostage. The result was the shooting of 10 Amish children resulting in the killing of 5 Amish girls and wounding 5 other Amish girls now at different levels of healing. He then killed himself as the police entered the school building through the windows as the doors were locked. With this tragic experience, the Amish were brought to the front page of national news as well as international news. As a result of this drastic happening, the Amish gave a national witness of forgiveness to the killer, not one of secular revenge and anger as the world might have done. This easy reading book gives the Amish perspective/theology of why they choose to forgive the shooter, went to the killer's funeral, and gave forgiveness/support to his family who knew nothing of the fateful plans. The book raised difficult questions of why and suggested possible answers. Why did he do this? Where was God in all of this? Why did this need to happen? What is this teaching us? What will this do with gun control issues? Etc. These are a lot of tough questions with no easy pat answers. This is a search that will continue to the end of time of why bad things happen to good persons.

The above named authors who have also studied Amish traditions and life have shown that the Amish choose forgiveness as a part of who they are in their relationship to God. The Amish rely on Scripture for God's guidance. One of these themes from scripture is the emphasis on forgiveness. There are references to the Bible(pg. 89) that Jesus forgave the person that did injury such as when Christ was on the Cross and he said "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:24). When Stephen was stoned, he said to "Lord, Lay not this sin to their charge."(Acts 7:54-60) This is also forgiveness but the word forgiveness is not used in this passage.

Another place forgiveness is mentioned is in the Lord's prayer which says "...forgive us our debts as we forgive us our debtors..." This forgiveness concept is taught from childhood on up. The Amish children are taught to memorize this prayer in the home before going to school. The adults are reminded of this at the worship services during the year by the church leaders. One Amish person interpreted Matthew 18:21-22(Jesus says to forgive 70 x 7) as "seventy times 7 means that we could have 490 tragedies(school shootings) and we still have to forgive"(pg.89). Others also mentioned this verse to the writers as a verse for the Amish to forgive. The forgiveness theme was also seen in Anabaptism(early 1500) from which the Amish came from.

With this information and a history of forgiveness in the Amish culture, a person starts to sense that this is a part of Amish life. This is ingrained so that the forgiveness theme is their way to go as they understand the scriptures. They had no ulterior motive when they went public to forgive the killer as a few critics thought or suggested. Would they have pressed charges if the killer had survived? Probably not. They would have left this up to the state as the killer was a non-Amish person living in the community as a milk truck driver. The Amish realize that the state needs to protect society and leaves this to the state/federal government. The young Amish men are conscientious objectors in opposition to war participation.

The Amish were very appreciative when the state police arrived at the school to stop the shootings, paramedics arrived to give the wounded first aid, etc. Family, neighbors, friends and other persons all over the world also gave them a lot of prayer support as well as donations exceeding \$4 million were given to them as well as many other services of support such as taking families to the hospital, preparing food, milking the cows, etc. A committee was appointed to handle the money.

During the authors' interviews, the Amish did have tears and hurts resulting from this unfortunate tragic incident. Forgiveness in the aftermath of a crime of this nature is not simple or easy as the authors found out from this experience even with Christian groups of persons. They are human like the rest of us regardless what they individually believe. Even though they publicly forgave as a group, some of the Amish privately admitted to crying and having hurts coping with this situation and are looking for answers that are difficult to find. Forgiveness for the Amish is a way of life for them. It is a habit of forgiveness as chapter 6 in the book is titled. It has been taught and continues to be preached as a part of their lifestyle.

To summarize this sad event from which persons did a lot of good deeds from a bad situation, the authors closing thought is something we can all learn from.

"In a world where faith often justifies and magnifies revenge, and a nation where some Christians use scripture to fuel retaliation, the Amish response was indeed a surprise. Regardless of the details of the Nickel Mines story, one message rings clear: religion was not used to justify rage and revenge but to inspire goodness, forgiveness, and grace. And that is a big lesson for the rest of us regardless of our faith or nationality."(pg. 183)

The book review was done by Roelif Badertscher