

Amish Grace
March 8, 2009
Amish Grace
The United Church of Gainesville
Larry Reimer

Matthew 5:21-24 (NEB); Ephesians 4:26-27

Sources for this sermon come from Amish Grace, by Donald Kraybill, Steven Nolt, and David Weaver-Zercher, published by Jossey Bass, 2007

Today I have another melody of grace for you. It follows the story that Sandy shared last week, but it has some significant differences. I'm going to tell you first a little bit about the Amish, second about grace, and third about a story of Amish grace. Then I'll look at how this story resonates with our lives.

I begin with two definitions, Amish and grace.

First, the Amish are a religious sect that grew out of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation. The Amish took the teachings of Jesus, especially those of the Sermon on the Mount, literally. They did not believe in infant baptism, and they refused to go to war. They separated themselves completely from government oversight and thus infuriated Catholic and Protestant state leaders alike. During the first century of their existence as many as 2,500 Old Order Amish were executed for their beliefs, many burned at the stake. Hundreds more were tortured or imprisoned.

In the beginning they were known as Mennonites, followers of Menno Simons. Later, a leader named Jakob Amman challenged the Mennonites in Switzerland and France about becoming too enamored with the culture of the day. Separating from the Mennonites in 1693, Jakob Amman's followers became known as the Amish. The Amish and Mennonites emigrated to America in search of religious freedom in the 19th century.

Today there are many Mennonite and Amish groups in America. My family and Stan Smith's family were Mennonites. Most Mennonites believe in modern clothing and technology, something Sandy's parents weren't exactly clear on when we met. They thought my parents would show up in a horse and buggy. Imagine their surprise when my dad roared up in his 350 hp Pontiac GTO with chrome valve covers and a Hurst shifter with a gearshift knob the size of a baseball.

The Amish reject modern clothing and technology. They desire to live a simple and humble life. They make certain compromises to live in modern society when absolutely necessary. For example they often have phones in their barns for emergencies and battery operated cash registers in their shops. They don't necessarily believe electricity is evil. But they do believe that electricity and the electronics that go with it can

undermine their traditions and accelerate assimilation into the society around them. A car, they believe, would pull the community apart. Horse and buggy transportation keeps the people connected to local communities.

Second, grace is a loving and compassionate way of life. It is a gifted way of living that comes from God, and this is enacted by following God rather than by something we do on our own. Forgiveness is a particular form of grace. It happens when a victim foregoes the right to revenge and decides to overcome bitterness toward the wrongdoer. The Amish believe that acting in kindness toward the wrongdoer is an important part of forgiveness.

Our Lenten bookmark has a quote by Ramakrishna, “The winds of grace are always blowing, but you have to raise the sail.” Here is a story of how the Amish raised the sail of grace on October 2, 2006 at the Nickel Mines School in Pennsylvania.

Nickel Mines is a one room school for 26 children in grades kindergarten to eighth grade run by the Amish for their children. On October 2, 2006, Charles Roberts, who drove a milk tanker that picked up milk at the local Amish farms, left a suicide note for his family and drove his pickup truck to the Nickel Mines School near his home.

When he arrived at the school he told the adults and the boys to leave. He then shot the ten remaining girls. Five survived their wounds. Five died. When police charged the building Roberts shot himself.

On the evening of the murders, a group of Amish men standing at the firehouse where the police command had been set up walked to the home of Amy Roberts, the widow of Charles Roberts. They talked with the Roberts family for about ten minutes and told them they didn’t hold anything against them. Another Amish man went to the killer’s father, a retired police officer who often provided taxi service for the Amish. The Amish man held Roberts’ father in his arms and said, “We forgive you.” That scene was repeated by many Amish, over and over.

When Charles Roberts was buried, more than half of the seventy-five mourners were Amish. Several weeks after the funeral there was a gathering in the firehouse between Roberts’ family and the Amish families who had lost children. They shared with one another, the Amish telling the Roberts family that they bore them no ill will. They all cried together and held one another. When the outside community raised money for the Amish families of the victims, the Amish decided that some of these funds must go to the killer’s widow, who now had no income.

The Roberts family said to the Amish community, “Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you.”

How could the Amish forgive in the face of such evil?

“Forgiveness is just a normal part of our life,” said an Amish Bishop. “It’s just what we do as a nonresistant people. It was not a new kind of thing.”

Every Amish person interviewed said that the grace shown the Roberts family began as a spontaneous expression of faith, not something that the church told these people to do.

This faith is nurtured by the way the Amish worship together in homes. Every Sunday they gather from neighboring farm houses and say the Lord's Prayer together. When they pray, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," they understand that if they don't forgive others God will not forgive them. One Amish writer says, "The person who refused to forgive others has cut himself off from love and mercy." This is a regular theme in Amish worship.

While I don't believe that about God, I do believe that if we are not forgiving people, it is not likely that we will receive or be able to accept forgiveness ourselves. Maybe that's not so different from the Amish interpretation of the Lord's Prayer.

Lots of questions were raised in the media about this act of forgiveness that focused so much attention on the Amish. In fact the news about the Amish forgiveness virtually overtook the news of the killing itself. Some wondered if the Amish would still have forgiven the killer if he had not taken his own life. Would they have gone to court demanding punishment? And what if the media had not converged on the community of Nickel Mines? Would the Amish have traveled to the Roberts' home if the TV cameras had not been standing by?

I call this practice, "Let's find the flaw in behavior that appears graceful and good." So let's look at these critiques of Amish behavior and how they might be answered.

First, is this truly legitimate Amish behavior or was it a response to the media attention?

Those who studied this event say that the Amish Grace at Nickel Mines was not a random event. It was part of a long tradition. It was a habit. This forgiveness rose spontaneously because it was a melody of grace that the Amish had been singing for centuries.

Our lives typically follow rather predictable patterns. Since we're calling this theme, "Melodies of Grace" let's use music as an example. Musicians have certain repertoires. They learn new music all the time, but they rely on a body of work, a style of playing that they have practiced and refined. When, for example, the Hogtown Strutters are asked to play on a moment's notice without a rehearsal, we pull out "When the Saints Go Marching In" or "Amazing Grace." Those songs are part of who we are. They're in our musical DNA.

Forgiveness is the repertoire of the Amish which they return to as naturally as musicians to their most familiar pieces. It's in their faith DNA.

Another critique of the Amish came from Jeff Jacoby, responding to the Amish forgiveness in the Boston Globe. He was not impressed with their behavior. "How many of us would really want to live in a society," he wrote "in which no one gets angry when children are slaughtered?"

The Amish admit that they get angry. But notice a word in both the gospel of Matthew and Paul's letter to the Ephesians that pops up in the translation I read this morning from the New English Bible. Jesus says not to nurse anger. Paul says in Ephesians, "Be angry but do not sin. Do not let the sunset find you still nursing it..."

The problem is not being angry but nursing anger, literally letting it feed off of you and grow, especially through the night. Don't go to bed with anger as your co-sleeper.

An Amish man, Gideon said, "It's OK to get angry, but don't hit the horse or kick the dog or punch your brother. If I hold a grudge for one day, it is bad. If I hold it for two days, it's worse. If I hold a grudge for a year than that man (Roberts) is controlling my life."

Another flaw that people point to is the Amish practice of shunning their own people. While the Amish forgive outsiders, they are very hard on themselves. If an Amish person violates the order of community and will not repent, they are shunned by the rest of the community.

Shunning is probably the most difficult Amish practice to explain. Forgiveness, the Amish believe, can go out to anyone. But pardon, which means restoring them to the community, requires repentance, a change of behavior. The Amish have strict rules for keeping the order of the community. And those who do not repent of their behavior are shunned. We may disagree with it, but it does not necessarily undermine the power of their forgiveness.

We can critique the Amish and say, "Yes, but..." about their acts of compassion, but rather than find the theological and psychological flaws in Amish life, which admittedly exist, I would rather see what we might learn from their tradition and this practice of radical Amish grace.

Back to our bookmark again. If the winds of grace are always blowing, what might we learn from this Amish experience as a way to raise our sails to catch that wind?

First, Jesus says that if on our way to worship we remember that a brother or sister has a grievance against us, we should go first and make peace with that brother or sister, and then bring our gift to the altar.

This is a passage I've wrestled with off and on for my entire ministry. I know I can't do it. I also know I can't give it up on it. Because I believe making peace is so important is why I preach sermons like this.

I don't think any of us can make peace with everyone. But I believe that when we come to pray with this awareness that things are not right in our world, the altars, the sacred places of our lives allow God to take our anger, wean us from nursing it, and transform it into a passion for healing.

My hope is that together we may use this melody of forgiveness we have heard in different forms last Sunday and today to bring our anger, our hurts, and the places we have hurt others to this altar for healing. When you light a candle here as the service begins, when you place a prayer in the prayer wheel, and when you open yourself to God in worship, let this

altar transform your life to make you both a forgiving and forgiven person.

The Amish have said that forgiveness is like a barn-raising, where the whole community comes out to build or rebuild a neighbor's barn. They forgive together in the same way they gather at someone's farm, raise the timbers, share the food, and build a new structure together. In the Amish community there is a history of forgiving just as concrete and obvious as the history of barn-raising. None of them could build a barn alone. None of them believe they could forgive alone. Together they can do both.

We have had glimpses of barn raising faith in this church. We had it working on our Habitat for Humanity house. We have had it on mission trips to rebuild the wreckage of Hurricane Katrina. We had it in a way at Sandy's ordination. We have had it on retreat and in countless projects we have shared together.

I call us to commit ourselves to be a community of healing and forgiving as well.

Fred Luskin director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project, says that forgiveness means becoming "a hero instead of a victim in the story you tell." I hope we may turn from victims to heroes by becoming a community of forgiveness ourselves where the melody of grace as forgiveness becomes as familiar as the singing of the alleluia at the end of our service.

Prayer –

O God of gentle strength and support, fold your arms around our Lenten journey. Rock us into forgiveness, given and received. Help us untie the burdens we carry and let them go in forgiving ourselves. Strengthen our broken hearts to forgive others as we wish to be forgiven.

O God of the winds and skies and seas, take us into your sailboat of grace, help us raise its sails, and then let us feel the power of that moment when the wind catches the sail, the line goes taught in our hands, and we glide across life's lake of beauty.

O God of gentle leading, take our hands, show us what is right, and grand us the courage and strength to do it. Stand us up to live with courage.

Join our hearts now, when we no longer know how to pray, in words you have given us...