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Amish Grace and the Rest of Us

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One year ago Tuesday, the words *Nickel Mines* became part of the nation's vocabulary. It was near that small Lancaster County village, just after ten in the morning, that Charles Carl Roberts IV carried his guns and his rage into a one-room Amish schoolhouse. Determined to even a score with God, Roberts quickly made good on his heinous commitment. As police surrounded the building, he opened fire on ten young female hostages, killing five of them.

The juxtaposition of Roberts's actions with the rural landscape on which they took place made the Nickel Mines school shooting a dreadfully captivating story. But even more newsworthy, if the op-ed pages were any measure, was the Amish community's response: forgiveness, extended to the killer's family within hours of the shooting.

To someone like me who studies Amish life, this extension of forgiveness in the shooting's aftermath came as no surprise. (*USA Today* quoted me the next morning as saying the Amish will "reach out" to the gunman's widow and will "try to express their forgiveness.") What *did* surprise me was the way the forgiveness story quickly and overwhelmingly eclipsed the story of violence.

What was it about the act of forgiveness—an act that the Amish themselves found quite ordinary—that spawned such interest in the mainstream media and the non-Amish people who consume it?

The easy answer is that the world is hungry for forgiveness. Every day our newspapers bulge with stories in which people have chosen revenge over forgiveness, rage over

grace. Iraq and Afghanistan are the most prominent examples, but retaliatory violence is not limited to faraway places. Moreover, vengeance takes many forms other than physical violence (American politics spawns relatively few fistfights these days, but it thrives on reputation-gouging and payback). For all these reasons, the Amish response to the Nickel Mines massacre offered a refreshing alternative to life-as-usual.

I don't wish to disparage the grace-filled Amish response or the world's hunger for forgiveness. At the same time, the prominence—some might say the power—of the Amish forgiveness story should not be reduced to that hunger. People may yearn for forgiveness, but they also yearn for other things that are less praiseworthy and at times problematic—like feel-good conclusions to traumatic events.

Stories that elicit hope—these are the stories that many people want to hear. The media are aware of that, which is one reason why the forgiveness story gained so much traction last October. Unfortunately, the ascendance of the forgiveness story came at a price. For one thing, it allowed many people to dispense with a dramatically different story that cries out for attention, not because of its uniqueness but because of its ordinariness: violence against women. Moreover, the forgiveness story, at least as it was conveyed by some media outlets, allowed non-Amish observers to feel good about *themselves*, for it implied that the Amish response was more essentially “American” than the violence that made it necessary.

Like many Americans, I too was moved by the Amish ability to extend words of grace to the killer's family. Yet if we are honest with ourselves, we'll need to admit that the forgiveness the Amish offered last October was hardly representative of the larger society in which we live. In fact, the grace extended by the Amish was more radical than what many Americans will be willing to abide and more self-giving than what many will be able to practice.

There's a reason for that. Most Americans have not spent their lives in communities that demand obedience to Jesus' command to “turn the other cheek” (Matthew 5:39). Even

religious communities that promote forgiveness as an ethical good rarely say what Amish church leaders say, which is “if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:15). Dwelling on these scriptures—and participating in many other practices that stress self-giving and personal sacrifice—incline the Amish toward forgiveness. To think that the Nickel Mines Amish conjured their forgiveness from thin air (or from a reservoir of generic Christian piety) underestimates the power of culture to shape one’s responses to tragedy and injustice.

Recognizing the power of the Amish cultural milieu is important for at least two reasons. First, it offers a dose of realism about the efficacy of an inspiring witness. Many observers commented in the aftermath of the Nickel Mines shooting that the Amish witness was moving, even inspirational. That may have been true, but fleeting stories, however poignant, do little by themselves. Habits instilled over time shape our lives far more profoundly than do inspiring stories we watch on television or download from the Internet.

Correspondingly, recognizing the cultural soil that fostered Amish forgiveness should compel those of us who aren’t Amish to reflect on the communities that we ourselves are building. If we truly think that forgiveness is a good thing (and some of us do), then we need to construct cultures that value and nurture forgiveness. How might we work more imaginatively to create communities in which enemies are treated as members of the human family? How might our communities foster visions that enable their members to see offenders, as well as victims, as persons with authentic needs?

There are no simple answers to these questions, though if the Nickel Mines Amish have anything to teach us, it’s that our answers surely will involve the habits we decide to value, the images we choose to celebrate, and the stories we seek to remember. If forgiveness is divine, as the poet Alexander Pope once suggested, it’s a divine act that’s broadly available to those who prepare for it—even before the offense that makes forgiveness necessary.

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