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## Grace and Reconciliation

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Last October's execution-style shooting of ten Amish girls in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania shocked a nation that has largely grown numb to violence. Almost as stunning was the Amish response to the horror: swift forgiveness before sunset on that crystal-clear day.

This quick extension of forgiveness brought significant attention—and high praise—to the Nickel Mines Amish community, but it also raised hard questions. What does it mean to forgive someone who is no longer living? And what difference—real difference—might it make in the world to forgive someone who is unable to receive this gracious gift?

Both of these questions raise a further question: what does forgiveness entail? Although theologians and psychologists debate the fine points, they generally agree on two things. First, forgiveness means that the victim forgoes the right to revenge. Second, forgiveness happens as the victim replaces angry feelings toward the offender with ones of empathy even compassion.

Do these elements of forgiveness apply to the killer, Charles Carl Roberts IV, who took his own life? We believe they do. Every day news stories show that vengeance does not die with the offender. Rather, it lives on in various forms of verbal retaliation and scapegoating. Children and grandchildren are frequently made to pay for the sins of their parents and grandparents; one need not travel to the Middle East to witness that reality.

The Nickel Mines Amish sought to end that cycle of retaliation before it even took hold. To be sure, media reports from last October sometimes overplayed the lack of anger in the Lancaster County Amish community. Some Amish people did admit to harboring bitter feelings toward their children's executioner. In each instance, however, these Amish victims insisted that vengeance was wrong. Moreover, they respected Charles Roberts' humanity by relating graciously to his family.

This commitment was initially expressed in words, declarations that were soon accompanied by acts of grace: hugs between Amish people and members of the Roberts family, the presence of Amish families at Roberts's burial, and monetary gifts to a fund for Roberts's children. These actions, expressed not to Roberts but to his family, were an outgrowth of the Amish commitment to forgive the killer himself. Gracious words came first, followed by gracious acts; all of them offered in good faith that compassionate feelings would eventually replace bitter ones.

These concrete acts of grace were not lost on the widow's family. "It's hard to accept what has happened," said one of widow's relatives, "but the kindness of the Amish has helped us tremendously." Another relative agreed, "If this had happened to some of our own people [non-

Amish], there would have been one lawsuit after another. . . . But this experience brought everybody closer together.”

Amish expressions of forgiveness opened the door to healing, but the healing would have been hindered had the killer’s family not walked through that door. Several weeks after the shooting, in a meeting at the local firehouse, members of Roberts’s family met with the Amish families who lost children. It was a profound time of grief and healing, according to some who were present. “We went around the circle and introduced ourselves,” an Amish leader said. “The killer’s widow just cried and cried and cried. We talked and cried and talked and cried. She was near me, and I put my hand on her shoulder, and then I stood up and I talked and cried.” In the words of another Amish participant, “There were a lot of tears shed that day. There was a higher power in the room.”

The firehouse meeting was the first step in an ongoing, sometimes awkward, but always insistent effort at reconciliation—at mending the relationships so strained by the shooting. A few weeks later the killer’s widow drove one of the Amish mothers to see her injured daughter recovering in a hospital. At Christmastime Amish schoolchildren went to the killer’s home to sing carols for the gunman’s widow and children. Local Amish farmers welcomed the reassignment of Roberts’s milk route to his father-in-law. Perhaps most importantly, the killer’s parents visited all the homes of the Amish parents whose children were killed or injured in the shooting.

Forgiveness does not always lead to the mending of relationships. In fact, those who study forgiveness are careful to distinguish between *forgiveness*, which requires only the willingness of the victim, and *reconciliation*, which cannot take place unless two parties relate to one another in good faith. In other words, reconciliation carries conditions that forgiveness does not. In the case of the Nickel Mines shooting, we simply don’t know whether the Amish community would have found—or even desired—reconciliation with the killer himself. At the very least, that sort of reconciliation would have demanded Roberts’s full contrition.

Still, one of the lessons that emerged from Nickel Mines is the power of forgiveness to make reconciliation a possibility. We shouldn’t be overly sanguine about it, for there are no guarantees. But in a world where retaliation is assumed, scapegoating is second nature, and payback is common currency, the Amish response should, at the very least, open our minds to other possibilities.

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