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In God they trust

The Amish are not a quaint artifact of our supposedly innocent past, but a radical counterculture that embraces Jesus' command to forgive others, even those who would kill their children.

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I first heard about the Nickel Mines school shooting after a Monday luncheon. A colleague saw me engaged in casual sidewalk conversation and sensed my blissful ignorance. "You should know about this," he said, and then proceeded to say words that don't often find themselves in the same sentence: *Amish, school, shooting*.

I hurried to my office. The early news reports were sketchy, and sometimes simply wrong (were there six dead, or were there three?). The shooter had not yet been identified, even in general terms. Who was he? What could possibly be his motive?

As the news reports grew more detailed, the killer's identity emerged: Charles Carl Roberts IV, a local truck driver, a father of three, a non-Amish person. It was at that point I realized something significant about my own thought processes: not once in that first hour had I entertained the notion that the shooter might be Amish. It's not that I hoped he wasn't Amish. It just didn't cross my mind that he might be, a supposition rooted in my long acquaintance with Amish culture, in particular its deep commitment to nonviolence.

To be sure, the Amish dedication to nonviolence shows occasional cracks and fissures. Domestic violence marks some Amish households, self-violence (suicide) tracks near the national average and some Amish church members actually have committed murder. But the Amish appetite for violence pales in comparison to that of the larger world.

The Amish predisposition toward nonviolence predates Mahatma Gandhi by about 250 years. The Amish would be quick to note, however, that even they didn't invent the notion. They would refer you instead to Jesus Christ and his willingness to suffer at the hands of his enemies. They might quote Jesus' words: his Sermon on the Mount ("whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also"); his matter-of-fact assertion about his followers ("My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight"); and his prayer from the cross ("Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do").

Forgiveness. Of all the questions I was asked by the media last week, the most insistent ones revolved around forgiveness. Will the Amish families who lost their little girls forgive this man? Will they hold a grudge against others who knew the killer but were unable to prevent his rampage?

I'm not surprised that these questions took center stage. In the United States, forgiveness is radically countercultural. Some theologians tell us it runs counter to human nature. The much more common response to being wronged (as if I need to tell you) is returning hurt for hurt.

The radical nature of forgiveness led the recently deceased French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, to call forgiveness a paradox. According to Mr. Derrida, it is only possible to forgive that which is unforgivable. Indeed, he wrote, much of which goes by the name "forgiveness" in Western culture is actually a form of social exchange: I will forgive you, but only if you make proper restitution. This latter type of forgiveness, which Mr. Derrida would say is not true forgiveness, finds plenty of nourishment in a society in which capitalism -- making others pay for what they get -- reigns supreme.

I am not aware of any Amish person who has read Mr. Derrida. They have, however, read the words of Jesus, the person that George W. Bush once named as his favorite political philosopher. "Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you." That's not the sort of rationality that fits comfortably with human nature, let alone with the spirit of 21st-century capitalism.

But enacting that rationality -- actually forgiving one's enemies -- does not come easily, even for the Amish. I may be wrong, but I suspect that some Amish people in and around Nickel Mines will experience feelings of rage and contempt for some time to come.

Still, language and intention do matter, as does the cultural air one breathes. Steeped in a milieu in which Christ's suffering love counts as normative, the Amish possess the resources to make their rhetoric of forgiveness a reality.

This should cause the rest of us to reassess our view of the Old Order Amish. It's all too easy to reduce the Amish to quaint leftovers from a virtuous American past. Plain dress, horses and buggies, barn raisings and colorful quilts: these are the images that capture the fancy of the world's Amish watchers.

One-room schoolhouses round out that picture, eliciting a deep nostalgia for America's imagined past. The horror of Monday's events would have grieved us had they occurred down the road at a public school. That the killings occurred in a one-room Amish schoolhouse exacerbated the anguish, for the Amish and their little school are, in many of our minds, somehow "ours," a reservoir of our supposedly more innocent past.

I am glad that Americans are grieving Monday's horrific events. From everything I know, the Lancaster Amish community welcomes the prayers of the world as a healing salve.

Still, I would hope that those of us outside the Amish community would work hard to resist the notion that the Amish are "ours." They are not.

The reason they are "not ours" is not their strange fashion sense, their Pennsylvania German dialect or their resistance to certain technologies that other Americans happily embrace. Rather, they are "not ours" because they manifest a rationality, anything but quaint, that refuses to dismiss Jesus' words about forgiving others as an unrealistic ideal. For the Amish, "In God We Trust" is more than a motto that decorates their currency. It

is a fundamental orientation to life that enables them to live nonviolently and forgive those who don't.

One of the hymns in the Ausbund, the 16th-century songbook that the Amish still use, describes Jesus' followers like this:

*Renouncing all, they choose the cross
and claiming it, count all as loss
even husband, child and wife.
Forsaking gain, forgetting pain
they enter into life.*

This hymn, written in the 1560s, recalls the persecution endured by the 16th-century Anabaptists, the Amish's theological forebears. And while the Amish in Nickel Mines are unlikely to think of their daughters as martyrs (in the classic sense of dying on account of their faith), they nonetheless find comfort in knowing that the deceased have now entered into life.

The Lancaster County Amish community grieves, and will continue to do so. But as the Apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, and as the Amish no doubt reminded one another as they buried their daughters' precious bodies, the Amish do not grieve "as others which have no hope."

One cannot understand Amish life apart from recognizing that they are a people of hope, a people of faith and a people of love -- a love that, irrational as it may seem, extends even to Charles Carl Roberts IV.

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