



CHAPTER SEVEN

The Roots of Forgiveness

If we don't forgive, we won't be forgiven.

—AMISH CARPENTER

We began to uncover the roots of Amish forgiveness by asking members of the community to describe it. A carriage maker met our request with a puzzled look: “It’s just standard Christian forgiveness, isn’t it?” When asked the same question, a twenty-eight-year-old Amish craftsman replied, “Amish forgiveness is just Christian forgiveness.” But after thinking for a moment, he wondered out loud, “Is it *different* from Christian forgiveness?” The thought had apparently never crossed his mind before. It had never crossed ours either.

Many religious traditions consider forgiveness a virtue, but Christianity has awarded it a particularly high place. This esteem is no doubt rooted in Christianity’s understanding of God as One who absorbs evil and willingly forgives sinful humans. Not only did Jesus ask God to forgive those who placed him on the cross (Luke 23:34), the Apostle Paul observed that, in the midst of Jesus’ suffering, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto

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them” (2 Corinthians 5:19). Throughout the New Testament, Christians are urged to follow Christ’s example by extending grace to their offenders. Leave vengeance to God, Paul instructs the church in Rome. “Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21).

The importance of forgiveness in the Christian tradition, when combined with the fact that so many Americans identify themselves as Christians, raises an interesting question: Did the keen public interest in the grace of the Amish stem from the fact that their forgiveness differed from other understandings of forgiveness, or did it arise from the Amish community’s willingness to practice what others only preach? One non-Amish observer remarked, “All the religions teach forgiveness, but the Amish are the only ones that do it.” Was it really just a difference between holding an ideal and practicing it, or were the basic notions of Amish forgiveness unique?

That’s the question we set out to answer. We speculated that the present-day Amish might trace their views of forgiveness back to the Protestant Reformation, when hundreds of their ancestors had died for their faith. But when we asked them about the roots of forgiveness, they began with Bible stories, not the sixteenth-century martyrs. More specifically, they focused on the New Testament, in particular the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In these New Testament texts, filled with stories about Jesus and the parables he told, the Amish find strong and inescapable reasons to forgive. We soon discovered that those reasons both parallel and depart from the way Christians from other theological traditions understand forgiveness.

The Amish and Discipleship

Many scholars have described the Anabaptist tradition, from which the Amish descend, as a discipleship tradition. From their beginning in the sixteenth century, Anabaptists have emphasized “following Jesus”