

Abide in My Love - John 15:14-27

By Patty Friesen (July 19/15)

Our scripture this morning follows the vine and branches passage last Sunday where Jesus exhorts his disciples to abide in his love as branches cling to the vine. To live this life of love is easier said than done. It is easy to sympathize with some far-away poor people in a distant land. It is much more difficult to sympathize with my young neighbours who kept me awake last night with their partying. It is easy to romanticize Christian love but much harder to live it out with the in-laws, children, co-workers and fellow congregational members! Abiding in the love of Christ takes work. That's why Jesus spends these last chapters in John's gospel talking about it. The most profound story of this kind of abiding in the love of Christ and bearing the fruit of love comes from the recent book *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy*.

Five years ago, the world was shocked by the shooting of five Amish girls at their school in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. By then we were growing almost immune to the frequency of school shootings. But the shock of such violence against Amish children in their little rural school shook us anew. Why would this tragedy happen to a people trying to live out their faith in quietness and gentleness at the edge of society? Equally shocking was the recent shooting at a black bible study by a young white racist in South Carolina. The church present at the young man's trial called out words of love and forgiveness in a way that seemed to touch even the journalists covering the story.

Five years ago also, the Amish families responded with amazing swiftness in offering forgiveness to the crazy man who had killed their students and himself. Even as their hearts were breaking, they reached out in love to the gunman's wife and family.

They didn't question why this happened. They recognized the dangerous consequences of a man with mental illness and a gun. He could have killed anyone's children. They rose above the whys and the blaming to work on making the gunman's wife and family feel accepted and forgiven by God and their community.

Meanwhile the rest of society discussed this response of love and forgiveness on late-night TV and talk radio. The American public had never heard of such a thing nor could they understand where it came from. They were used to blame and rage and retribution – roots of the ongoing culture of violence in North America. What made the Amish different? Ironically, the quietest Christians in North America had the loudest Christian witness ever heard on this continent.

Several Mennonites wrote *Amish Grace: How forgiveness transcended tragedy* to explain to the rest of society how the Amish community could respond in such a way. They highlighted the fact that Amish grace was a natural outpouring of their faith and religious practice and culture. The Amish didn't have to sit down and figure out how to respond to tragedy. It came swiftly and naturally because it was something they believed and practiced daily as a part of their home and church life.

There are five practices that shape Amish attitudes of grace. The first is that the Lord's Prayer is a part of their daily lives, prayed both at breakfast and at supper. The Amish said, "We don't think we can improve on Jesus' prayer. Why would we need to? We think it's a pretty good, well-rounded prayer. It has all the key points in it including forgiving others as God has forgiven us."

Secondly, the Amish take seriously the words of Jesus on the cross, "Forgive them Father for they know not what they do." And indeed, they believed the mentally ill

man who shot their children didn't really know what he was doing. And even if he knew the sin he was committing, they would respond in the practice of Matthew 18 to go to him and in love try to turn him back to the right path. While this wasn't possible in this situation, they went to the gunman's widow, parents and children with food and forgiveness. They attended the gunman's funeral and forgave him in the grave.

Thirdly, next to the Bible, the Martyr's Mirror is the most important book in Amish homes. They read it to their children as bedtime stories of the early martyrs of the church. We may think this is rather grisly bedtime reading but it reinforces who the Amish are as a people willing to die for their beliefs. They remember Joseph Ammon, their founder and all who were thrown into prison in the Middle Ages because of their faith. In the Martyr's Mirror, Dirk Willems returns to pull his jailer out of the freezing river, risking his own life to save another life. Dirk is a hero for Amish children. They don't have Batman, Spiderman and Catwoman as their heroes. Their heroes are those who offer their lives for the sake of others. Facing the gunman in the schoolroom, thirteen-year old Marian Beachy offered her life in exchange for her fellow students. It was ingrained in her to do so – to display incredible courage and spiritual maturity in the face of death.

Together with the Lord's Prayer, the Bible and Martyr's Mirror, the Amish place a high emphasis on the songs of their ancestors. They have the Ausbund, the hymnal from the 16th century with the long verses of the songs of the martyrs written in German. There is no musical notation or time signature. The tunes and timing are passed down through generations and may sound slow and off-tune to our ears. The songs of the

martyrs from the sixteenth century remind them of God's presence in time of suffering. Amish culture gives them stories and songs to transcend evil.

Fifthly, the Amish don't just talk and sing about forgiveness. They practice it; first in their homes and then in the church. They say anger may be allowed in individualistic societies that believe in the right to self-expression. But anger is a danger in tight Amish families and society, leading to actions that break down families and community through resentment, bitterness and grudge holding. They work hard at dealing with their anger. Before they take communion once a year, they make peace with those who have wronged them in the past year and then they confess before the congregation, "I am at peace with God and my fellow man." It is such hard work to make this kind of peace before communion that they only have communion once a year!

Finally, a culture of forgiveness is cultivated among the Amish because of their belief in God's providence. Ultimately God will take care of them and provide for all their needs as God has throughout their history of persecution and living on the edge of society. This pervasive trust in the goodness and love of God enables them to believe that they can be good and loving people when others persecute them.

North America tried to figure out the Amish on late-night TV and talk radio and some criticized their response, saying the Amish were in denial of their grief and anger. They forgave too quickly. They were not dealing with the tragedy in a realistic way and they were letting the wrongdoer off scot-free. The Amish replied that they didn't know what they would have done if the gunman was still alive. But they knew for certain that his family could not be held responsible for his actions. His family was victim of his violence also and suffered great guilt and shame by his actions.

Furthermore, forgiveness is not a denial of the wrongdoing. Forgiveness means admitting what was done was wrong and should not be repeated. It recognizes that there are still consequences of the wrongdoing that need to be dealt with and that may include jail time for some people. Forgiveness does not deny, excuse or condone wrongdoing. It does not even pardon it or expect people will live happily ever after with each other. It is recognition and release and the first step in some kind of movement in the feelings of the one doing the forgiving.

Forgiveness has to be a choice. No one can be forced or expected to forgive. Forgiveness gives power to the one wronged to choose how they will respond. We may think we have more power by withholding forgiveness but it just makes us unhappy. Forgiveness is empowering. When it is freely chosen and practiced, it has great psychological benefits for us. It frees us to begin to move in our emotions, rather than feeling stuck and trapped by them. It gives us peace. It gives us freedom. It is a weight lifted off our shoulders. It doesn't mean that everything is rosy but it allows for new perspectives on things. We may have to keep returning to this release, 70 times 7. Forgiveness is hard work but those who have experienced it say it benefited them even if their wrongdoer didn't ask for it.

Beyond the individual benefits of forgiveness – there are huge social benefits. Marriages can only survive with forgiveness. Extended families that are able to forgive each other can live together peaceably or at least see each other at reunions without killing each other. Churches that are able to forgive can survive the pressures of declining membership and keep hope and vision alive. We have a lot to learn from our Amish cousins about remaining close to our spiritual roots in scripture, prayer and our

religious heritage of non-violence. They have maintained their distinct physical culture differently than we Mennonites but hopefully we all can still maintain our common spiritual culture. We can practice the spiritual disciplines of forgiveness and love through the Lord's Prayer, scripture, stories and songs in our homes and in our churches.

The Amish admit that forgiveness of their tragedy wasn't easy. It began with their words to the gunman's widow but then they had to follow it up with actions. The intention to forgive leads to the work of forgiveness. In their quiet grief, they went through their rituals of mourning –tearing down the old Nickel Mines School - the site of such sadness and building a new school in a different site that they named New Hope School.

May God give us all such a spirit of Christian courage and hope and abiding in the love of Christ. Please turn to #145 HWB There's a Wideness in God's Mercy.