

**Headmaster' Remarks
Upper School Chapel
February 13, 2008**

Deuteronomy 10: 12-13

So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being.

Matthew 5: 1-11

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Matthew 18:21-22

The Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

**"Forgiveness Amidst Incomprehensible Tragedy:
The Light Can Shine in Darkness"**

Many of you will remember this devastating day—Monday, October 2, 2006—just over sixteen months ago. Charles Carl Roberts IV, a withdrawn and quiet and introverted man and as it turns out, a deeply troubled soul, enters The West Nickel Mines Amish School, a one-room 19th century-era schoolhouse in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania serving 26 Amish children ages 6 to 13. He orders the boys out of the schoolhouse and then kills five girls and critically wounds five other girls. And then he kills himself.

One Amish leader described these horrific shootings as "our 9/11" (Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy, John Wiley & Sons, 2007, Donald B. Kraybill, Steven Knolt, David Weaver-Zercher, p. 17). The shock and trauma of five little girls' being innocently gunned down invited comments similar to those made by people about September 11, 2001 when the Twin Towers were struck or November 22, 1963 when President Kennedy was assassinated. One Amish father said this: "I will never forget where I was, what I was doing, and who told me first about the shooting" (Kraybill, p. 17). I could say the same thing about my memory of President Kennedy's assassination and I suspect many of my colleagues here could as well.

And yet amidst the horror of the October 2, 2006 shootings—the kind of tragedy that no one can explain or ever fully put to rest or make sense of—the Amish of Lancaster County embraced an ethic of love and forgiveness that all of us, regardless of our beliefs or world views or faith traditions, ought at least to consider and ponder.

The Amish have a very distinctive history and culture. They live simply and faithfully. Because of their commitment to their particular faith and to the solidarity of their families and their community, they have chosen not to embrace many of the conveniences and values which we take for granted—cars, phones—and the list goes on.

Some very brief history about the Amish. They are descended from the Anabaptists of the 16th century who challenged the leaders of the Protestant Reformation to reform the Church even more radically than the likes of John Calvin and Martin Luther had in mind, and to embrace a “new concept of the Church as a voluntary gathering of those committed to obeying Jesus’ teachings . . . [A]nd they symbolized their commitment with adult baptism” (Kraybill, p. 69). The Anabaptists also felt a church should be a self-sufficient community whereas Catholics and “mainstream reformers” thought the church should be supported by the State. In fact, the Anabaptists—now the Amish—“believed that the faithful church should not rely on state support or sanction at all. For them, any links to the State were a sure sign that the Church had compromised its primary commitment to God” (Kraybill, p. 69). The Amish believe—as did our own Founding Fathers—that religion, if it is to have any real meaning and substance, must be embraced freely and without any pressure or coercion whatsoever from the State.

Catholic and Protestant leaders of the 16th century disagreed strongly with the position of the Anabaptists and as a result, the Anabaptists were jailed and even killed for their beliefs. In fact, even though there were never that many Anabaptists, they accounted for about half of all Western European Christians who were killed because of their faith during the 16th century (Kraybill, p. 70). The point is that suffering and death and martyrdom have been a part of the Amish story since their ancestors—the Anabaptists—first embraced and expressed their beliefs.

A couple of other points about the Amish before we talk about how they dealt with the horror of the Nickel Mines School shootings. Their reading of the Bible calls them to oppose violence firmly and thus, they do not and will not serve in the military. Also, they hold one another strictly accountable to Amish beliefs and will expel members “from their fellowship” in order to push the wayward to reform their behavior (Kraybill, p. 69). They do not participate in our country’s Social Security system because they believe it is their responsibility—not the government’s—to take care of one another in cases of sickness or financial setbacks. In the minds of the Amish, Social Security “undermines the Church’s responsibility to care for the needs of its members” (Kraybill, p. 170).

Because of the history and beliefs of the Amish and the way they interpret Scripture, one of their first responses to the murders at Nickel Mines was to forgive. Yes, they were terribly saddened by this tragedy and shed many “tears of grief” but remarkably, there was little anger. As I read about this tragedy, it is hard to understand why there was apparently so little anger. I know I would have been terribly angry and resentful if a member of my community had been taken away from me so brutally. I don’t know that I have it in me to forgive as the Lancaster County Amish did. But, we have to look at the distinctive traditions and beliefs and the very tight-knit community and culture of the Amish in order to comprehend why they would respond first with forgiveness of this horror. Consider these important Amish beliefs:

First, the interests of the Amish community, symbolized in its church, transcend the freedom of the individual. This is probably the greatest difference between mainstream American life and the Amish tradition. It is just expected that Amish people will “yield to the authority of the Church community and ultimately to God” (Kraybill, p. 93).

Also, the Amish culture is one of restraint. The Amish tend not to call attention to themselves. They don't think it appropriate to speak out loudly or aggressively about their faith. That would be presumptuous and prideful. "For the Amish, genuine spirituality is quiet, reserved, and clothed in humility, expressing itself in actions rather than words" (Kraybill, p. 94).

Consistent with their humility, the Amish never engage in the sort of debates about religion and culture that we oftentimes hear today. As one Amish minister put it, "Shouting down the beliefs of other people is surely not what we are here on earth for. None of us can be sure that we have all the truth." Instead, "what needs to be deplored and regretted is the abuse of power that almost always goes with (any) group of people having the upper hand" (Kraybill, p. 107). Even though the Amish are rooted in a culture and set of beliefs nurtured over the course of more than 500 years, they recognize that as human beings with the flaws which we all share, they do not and cannot have a full understanding of truth. And note their concerns about the tendency of groups in power to abuse that power and to assume that they somehow have a better understanding of truth than those not in power. Here are the Amish—folks not in the mainstream of our society—who understand our society better than those of us who might consider ourselves in the mainstream.

There are certain pieces of history and Scripture that the Amish constantly revisit and review in church and in school and in other settings. The stories of the martyrs who were killed for their faith 500 years ago and who forgave their killers before they were executed are told time and time again. "In retelling the martyr stories, the Amish surrounded themselves with historical role models who not only submitted their lives to God but also extended forgiveness to those who were about to kill them." These stories link "forgiveness to other theological themes, such as humility, submission, non-resistance, and love of enemy, all of which nourished the community's response to the shooting." (Kraybill, p. 100)

The theological touchstone for the practice of forgiveness is the Lord's Prayer which is repeated in school and in all Amish church services. The phrase—"forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"—is especially important. ***Pure and simple, the Amish believe that they will be forgiven only as they are able to forgive others.*** And so almost immediately upon hearing about the tragedy at the Nickel Mine School, the Amish began to help each other forgive the killer Charles Roberts and his family. Let me read some excerpts from the book entitled Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy which describes how the Amish rose from grief and suffering to forgiveness.

"Within a few hours of the shooting, some Amish people were already reaching out to the killer's family. Amos, an Amish minister in one of the nearby church districts, described it to us like this: 'Well, there were three of us standing around the firehouse on Monday evening. We just thought we should go and say something to Amy, Robert's widow. . . . So we walked over to her father's house and she, her children, and her parents were there alone. So we just talked to them for about ten minutes to express our sorrow and told them we didn't hold anything against them'" (Kraybill, p. 43-44). "That same evening, several miles away, an Amish man went to see the killer's father . . . [A]nd then an Amish neighbor (went) to comfort the family. He stood there for an hour and he held that man (Mr. Roberts) in his arms and said, 'We forgive you.'" (Kraybill, p. 44). "The father of the killer's widow said this: 'There have been many Amish stopping at Amy's house and expressing their forgiveness and condolences and bringing her gifts.'" (Kraybill, p. 44).

“Two days after the killing, an Amish woman from Georgetown, appearing in silhouette on CBS’s *Early Show*, also spoke about forgiving the killer: ‘We have to forgive,’ she said. ‘We have to forgive him in order for God to forgive us.’” (Kraybill, p. 45).

“The parents of several of the slain children invited members of the Roberts’ family to attend their daughters’ funerals” (Kraybill, p. 45). “About thirty-five or forty Amish came to the burial of the killer. They shook our hands and cried. They embraced Amy and the children. There were no grudges, no hard feelings, only forgiveness. It’s just hard to believe that they were able to do that” (Kraybill, p. 46). “. . . [A]mish people contributed to the family (of the murderer) personally by making donations to the Roberts Family Fund established by the Coatesville Savings Bank” (Kraybill, p. 47). “A friend of the killer’s widow said, ‘The forgiveness and generosity of the Amish had a powerful impact on Amy. She was overwhelmed and very moved by it. Many Amish neighbors came to visit her in the weeks following the shooting. They came to the burial, they brought flowers to her home, and they brought meals’” (Kraybill, p. 48).

This story is both tragic and inspiring. It is tragic because of the horrible and needless death of five young girls and the unspeakable devastation, grief, and suffering those deaths brought to the Nickel Mines Amish families and their community. It is inspiring because of the brand of forgiveness and love displayed by the Amish in response to this terrible tragedy.

The Amish remind us that the desire to love and forgive amidst extreme suffering is a choice that can be made. Indeed, they would argue that it had to be made. Why did they make the choice for love? For forgiveness? Yes, that choice is connected certainly to their history and their teachings and their close sense of community and their particular reading of Scripture. It is my belief that all of those factors, combined with their deep faith, somehow gives them a distinctively clear understanding of agape—the idea of a very intentional, active love for others that grows out of God’s unconditional love for each of us. It is a very risky, hard kind of love because it makes us all so very vulnerable and it requires such a difficult and disciplined choice. But agape may in fact be the only true path to the kind of forgiveness offered by the Amish and to what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called the “beloved community”—which I believe is the kind of community the Amish very humbly aspire to and which called forth incredible grace offered by the Amish on the heels of their horrible nightmare of October 2006.

I realize that the Amish have a distinctive faith and culture and that they challenge us to a standard of love and forgiveness that many of us may well feel is beyond our grasp. And yet they did what they did and thus remind us that there can be great light and love amidst terrible darkness.

Billy Peebles