

GENUINE FAITH

Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord, your God (Isaiah 43:1-3).

His wife said to [Job], "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die." He replied, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (Job 2:9,10).

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed (1 Peter 1:3-7, underlining mine).

Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (2 Corinthians 4:17,18).

Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith, I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show my faith by what I do (James 2:17,18).

The above Scriptures and many more have been going through my head ever since I heard of the terrible tragedy that took place in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania on Monday, October 2, 2006. On that day Charles Roberts, a 32-year-old suicidal gunman, entered a one-room schoolhouse where twenty four children from the Old Order Amish were being taught by four adults. After he dismissed the boys and the adults, he was left with ten young girls, his intended victims. Methodically, he tied them up. Abandoning his plan to sexually assault them, he shot each of them instead, killing five. Then he killed himself.

I first heard of this incident while watching a TV news program the next day. A female reporter was interviewing a Mennonite woman who had been midwife at the births of at least two of the dead girls. The reporter was determined to uncover what she thought the Amish had to be feeling: outrage and anger. The woman kept calmly explaining that none of that existed. Then she said something like this: "Of course we grieve. We're human. But when Christ lives in you, there is a difference."

"Yes, YES!" I shouted inwardly. That God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – lives inside believers is foundational to our faith. I have always thought that fact should make a huge difference between believers and unbelievers, in how we look at death and dying, for example. Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:13: *Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest, who have no hope.* In the newspaper and magazine articles I read subsequently, I found one that said the Amish really believe the girls are in a better place. I believe that, too! And I was delighted to think this message was being carried all over the country so compellingly. "Oh, Lord, may many have ears that hear and hearts that receive the message, all for your glory. Yes, you do make a difference."

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Before continuing with the story, I want to tell you about my connections with the Amish. The first is geographic. I grew up in Lebanon County, PA and went to college in Lancaster County, which abuts

my home county. To me, the Amish were a curiosity, much as they are to tourists today; I just didn't have to travel far to see them. I knew many of their customs and sayings; some of the expressions and language syntax seemed normal to me, as the whole area was basically Pennsylvania Dutch by culture. Even the German dialect that they use was sometimes spoken in my house by my grandmother and her contemporaries. But I did not know any of the Amish personally.

The second is a religious connection. My childhood church was the Church of the Brethren, one of a number of denominations, including Mennonite and Amish, where the "plain people" worshipped. The sects had their roots in Switzerland many years ago. Among other similarities, all these groups had regulations concerning dress. The women had long hair which they kept covered with various styles of white caps and dark bonnets. And each group had a list of forbidden things, in an attempt to avoid being tainted by "the world." The Old Order Amish were the strictest of all, with the Church of the Brethren, perhaps, at the other end of the spectrum. By the 1940s, the decade of my youth, change was well underway in my church, and I was caught up in the emotions of it all. The denomination still exists, but the distinctive dress is seldom seen now.

The third connection is personal: my great-grandfather Joshua Yoder King, my maternal grandmother's father, was Amish. I didn't know this until well after I was married. What I did know was that he was a preacher and traveling evangelist with the Church of the Brethren. After I was a graduate of Millersville State Teachers College (now Millersville University), I found out that J.Y. King had gone to that same college, probably in the 1860s, when it was the 2-year Millersville Normal School for teacher preparation! My great-grandfather was a school teacher, as well as a preacher, and I, unknowingly, was following in his footsteps. Then I heard that he had been raised Amish, but had been asked to leave the group. That made sense to me, because the Amish do not permit their people to pursue higher education. J.Y. King paid quite a price to follow his calling. I'm glad he did it, though; otherwise, I would not have been born! He came from the Lancaster County area and left relatives behind. When my brothers and I watched the horse-drawn buggies that shared the roads with our car, we never dreamed that distant cousins of ours might be inside. Might we be related to those in our current story?

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As I wrote those last few lines, my mind flooded with the same thoughts that no doubt came to you as you read them: in a very real sense, we are all related. Not only do we all descend from Adam and Eve, but we all come from Noah and his wife as well. I wonder what would happen if each of us would consider everyone else to be our cousins? What if we could see beyond the deeds and circumstances of others and find our shared humanity? (My grandmother, J.Y. King's daughter, had a way of doing that. When a room full of people would begin to gossip about someone who did not meet their standards in some way, Grandma would stop the talk by quietly saying, "He (or she) is human, too.") What if, in addition, all the members of God's faith family remembered that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, that if Jesus had not died for us while we were still sinners, all of us would end up eternally separated from God? Then, I think, we would be getting close to the source of the behavior the Amish showed after their girls were killed and wounded on October 2.

To the Amish, six people died in the schoolhouse that Monday, the sixth being Charles Roberts. He was a neighbor of theirs who left behind a widow and three fatherless children. While the Amish gathered together to cry and to process their own grief with each other, with mental health counselors and with non-Amish friends, they were also sympathizing with the Roberts family, figuring that they had shame and guilt to deal with, along with grief. How could they help to ease the bereaved family's pain? To the amazement of the general public, the Amish community decided that very day to reach out to the Roberts family with the gift of forgiveness. Those in the house with Marie (the new widow) and her relatives were moved to tears when the Amish arrived, hugged the family members, including Charles' parents, and said, "We will forgive you." One pastor said, "God met us in that kitchen." Of course! The depth of that love and the generosity of that forgiveness are godly, indeed. We are told to forgive each other as the Lord forgave us; the Amish take that seriously and put it into practice. One reporter said,

"We should be more like them." Yes, we should. Obedience to God is a choice. The Amish forgave as an act of the will, a deliberate decision, one that we can copy.

That was only the beginning of the good deeds the Amish, individually and as a community, did for the Roberts family. (One writer mentioned them as "generous in spirit"; only God knows the full extent to which this generosity transformed itself into deeds.) Some of them asked permission to attend the funeral for Charles Roberts. Of the 75 in attendance, I read, approximately half were Amish. Then they set up a fund to help Marie and her children financially! Some commands from Scripture that come to mind are *"Love your neighbor as yourself"*; *"In everything do to others what you would have them do to you"*; *"Love keeps no record of wrongs"*; and *"Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else."* Truly, the Amish have shown us their faith by their deeds!

I know a man who became angry when he heard that the Amish forgave the man who murdered their children. "He doesn't deserve to be forgiven!" he said. My reaction was far different: I was thrilled! Forgiveness is an emotional subject to contemplate, for, while reasonable, it also operates outside the realm of reason. Just think of the extent of the forgiveness God gives to every one of his children at the moment we are born into his family by grace through faith in Jesus: all of our sins, past, present and future, are forgiven, forever gone, never to be held against us, never to bar us from our heavenly home! And all of it undeserved! Having experienced such extreme forgiveness, God's people ought to be able to pass it on. The Amish say that forgiveness heals the forgiver as well as the forgiven. It certainly does! Blessed are those who will not let their souls and spirits be infected by the poison of unforgiveness.

Charles Roberts told the girls who questioned him in the school, and also wrote in a suicide note to his wife, that he was full of hate and anger toward God, whom he blamed for the death of his baby daughter, born prematurely in 1997. Nine years was a long time to carry that deep a grudge, a long time to let the poison fester inside him. By hating and being so angry with God, he cut himself off from the comfort God offers to those who turn TO him in their distress. In addition, Mr. Roberts was filled with hatred toward himself. The memory of something he apparently did when he was about twelve years old both haunted him and taunted him: would he ever do such a thing again? Maybe he would! His inner torment was quite a contrast to the inner life of his victims.

There were many photographs of the Amish in the media after the crime. Under one was this description: "They are calm. They trust in God." Peace flows out of a deep trust on God. What peace and trust are in Job's answer to his wife after all the turmoil he went through! His losses included the deaths of his ten children as well as his livelihood and then, his health, yet he would not give up and curse God. Job expected that troubles as well as good times were normal even in the lives of people of faith. Of the Amish, I read that they don't deny death; they address and accept it. Their thinking sounds like Job's, doesn't it? They also pass along their values to their children, by word and by example. At the wake in the home of one of the victims, the father said to a reporter, "It's very important that we teach our children not to think evil of the man who did this." The brave, quiet demeanor of the girls in the school-house bears witness that the young ones do adopt the lessons passed on by their elders. One of the older girls made an offer to the gunman: "Shoot me and let the others go." That is godly behavior worthy of a seasoned follower of Christ!

I have occasionally read of individuals who were able to forgive those who committed crimes against them or their family members, even offering grace, mercy and love to those who had "trespassed against them." I am always glad when such stories are publicized, for they reveal to the public the Christian life at its best. When I was still preaching, I incorporated such stories into my sermons, holding them up as examples for all of us. But I can't recall a time like this one where an entire faith community acted with such unity! And they did it so quickly, making it obvious that the basic guidelines for decisions like these were already part of the fabric of their lives, leaving only the details to be handled now. I have already written about the corporate decision to forgive. What a wise path to follow, allowing the healing to begin immediately! Other matters were handled just as wisely:

– Donated money. Usually the Amish do not accept funds from outside sources, preferring to take care of each other as needs arise. Humbled by and appreciative of the donations that came pouring in, they decided to make an exception in this case, partly because they didn't want to deny the donors the blessing that comes from giving. I like this example of flexibility that takes into account the current situation and the good of others. There is a time to be firm and a time to bend.

– School building. Within days of the tragedy the community decided to demolish the school building, hiring an outside firm to accomplish the task. I'm glad the building was not allowed to become a tourist attraction for the curious to view. The humanity of the Amish stands out in this decision, also. To me it means the schoolhouse itself stirred up such sorrow that they did not even want to be involved in its destruction. Yes, they did mourn the shooting of their girls!

With the building (representing the past) gone, the community resumed the education of their children in temporary quarters while looking to the future by planning to construct a new schoolhouse. They seem determined to continue their policy of trust by not barricading the new building against strangers. No bending on this issue; I admire that resolve.

Questions for consideration: How would my faith community react if forced to go through a trial of this proportion? What does my church think about troubles in the lives of believers? What do I think? Is there a unity in my congregation about the basic tenets of the faith, including those that govern a Christian's everyday behavior? Is it reasonable to expect such unity?

One more incident begs to be included in this essay. I quote from the October 23, 2006 issue of *People* magazine:

– Midwife Rita Rhodes Reed recalls visiting the home of one of the dead, 7-year-old Naomi Rose Ebersol. Though grieving, Naomi's father, Amos, chose to focus mainly on the fact that the youngsters had not been sexually abused, as police suspect had been Roberts' intention. "You know, it was a battle between good and evil in that school," he said soothingly, "and good won." Says Reed: "That's a tremendous thing when you're standing over your dead daughter and saying that good won."

Yes, it is. It's a profound example of giving thanks in all circumstances, which Paul says is the will of God in Christ Jesus for all of his children. Thanksgiving, as well as forgiveness, leads to peace.

You know that I was deeply moved by this whole incident. I would place this story of faith on a par with the stories in Hebrews 11. The Lord asked the entire community to pass through the waters, through the rivers, through the fire. They did so, and were not destroyed, for the Lord, their redeemer, was with them. The grief they were required to suffer only served to prove that their faith was genuine. God already knew that and perhaps the Amish did too, but now the whole world knows, to the praise and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. To the entire community in Lancaster County I say THANK YOU and send this blessing: "*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit*" (Romans 15:13). Amen.