

## “Forgive and Forgive?” November 23, 2008

A few weeks ago I was at what we call staff chapel over at St. Luke's. It is our weekly staff meeting and there is a worship component to it. Anyway, the person leading worship that day played this video about forgiveness. Have you ever had one of those experiences where you see a movie, or hear a song...maybe something on the news and for whatever reason it just really gets to you...gets right down into the core of you in that particular moment. Maybe another day or another time it wouldn't strike you that way...but today...in this moment. Well, that's the way this video about forgiveness hit me. I know many of you have that feeling here at The Garden. As I've reflected about this dynamic...I think, at least for me, the common denominator when I have these kinds of experiences is usually because whatever it is, is usually something I've been wrestling with in my own life.

Moreover though, I think this one was so profound for me because it was so stealthy...so sneaky. The more deeply something is buried, the more it surprises us when it appears. Anyway, I'll get to that later...but I want to share this video with you. It is about the shooting that took place in the Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania two years ago.

>> [VIDEO](#): The Power of Forgiveness <<

I'd guess each of our reactions to seeing this short video are many and varied...I found it very interesting when I took this video and idea to worship team...the reactions just among our small group was just as many and just as varied. We ranged from passionately moved, to stunned disbelief, to discomfort. It seemed everyone heard something different...some aspect of the story spoke more loudly than others to each of us. And some of us heard the same thing in different ways.

For instance, one of the strongest parts for all of us was the sense of community among the Amish people. However, there was kind of divide in our thinking about the strength of the community...on one had what a beautiful supportive environment...from the film we hear:

- One element of this that enables the Amish to forgive is the strength of the community. That they don't need to defend themselves individually, that they don't need to retaliate.
- The Amish have a profound ability to absorb adversity; they have a strong sense of yieldedness to God. A sense of acceptance to not argue, debate or get angry with God.

I have to tell you, I come down on both sides at the same time on this one. While I was blown away by the strong sense of community, I was also challenged by the idea of not arguing with God, or not getting angry with God. Right after this tragedy happened I was participating in a small group discussion with some folks I knew quite well.

The moderator of our group came in on the afternoon this shooting happened. We were all talking about it and she became quite animated. And...keep in mind, she is the pastor of a vibrant church down on 34<sup>th</sup> and Central. She said forgive! Forgive my @\$...somebody come in and shoot my babies, it'd be a while before I'd be forgiving anybody. Oh come on ya'll, God knows...God knows those people are mad as hell. Forgive...uh uh, not today...maybe tomorrow, but not forgiving anyone today.

I'll tell you what, if we are honest...at least if I'm honest...she's probably pretty close to where a lot of us are when it comes to forgiveness. But the deeper truth is, I believe, forgiveness is so vastly different for all of us. For some unconditional forgiveness along the lines of the Amish model...comes naturally. For many others of us...forgiving and accepting forgiveness is a daily struggle. And, as a worship team, that is what we began to talk about...the many kinds of forgiveness, especially as we move into our holiday season...a time when our inability to forgive or accept forgiveness can prevent us from coming together at all. Sometimes forgiving is easy...say, you break something or forget to return something borrowed.

But, what happens when a tragedy has occurred? What happens when the person we need to forgive or desperately want to be forgiven by are...those closest to us...our family or our friends?

One of the simplest forms of forgiveness of which I am aware is discussed in our Bible passage this morning. From Matthew 6:14-15 we hear:

**"In prayer there is a connection between what God does and what you do. You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part."**

The "prayer" to which this Bible passage refers is one many of you may be familiar..."The Lord's Prayer." Jesus has just taught the Disciplines about what is really important in life, and when he says to them about prayer is don't be hypocrites...be real...pray for life-giving things: **"And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive those who trespass against us."**

I want to be careful here though. While this is such a seemingly simple prescription...and God forgive me for the dumb things I've done, just like I forgive the dumb things folks have done to me. That's simple enough, but I think the poignant part of this act is making the act of forgiving and asking forgiveness a part of our relationship with God.

What this doesn't do is somehow trivialize some pretty awful things. Some things we need to forgive and be forgiven for aren't quite so easy. I know for a fact that I am not powerful enough to forgive on my own...I've tried it and I've failed. This simple statement in this simple prayer reminds me that I can partner with something far greater than myself to try and achieve forgiveness...with God I don't face this stuff alone.

I absolutely hate being part of the plotline...I hate it when truth stares you in the eye and doesn't blink. Remember I said that when we have such a visceral reaction to a song or a video, it is usually because the subject of that song or video is something with which we ourselves have been wrestling. Moreover, often times it catches us off guard because it is something we have perhaps hidden from ourselves. Well, it turns out I think I have more in common with my pastor friend at 34<sup>th</sup> and Central than I'd imagined. You know...forgive my @#\$. Maybe tomorrow, but forgive? Not today!

Last weekend my sister had a party to celebrate her daughter's wedding and her kids in turn had a surprise party for her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. Well, here's the thing...they did all of this last minute...and it didn't really fit into my schedule. I'm a busy guy you know, I work weekends—I couldn't just go bustling off to Pennsylvania...no way to pack up the car with the kids and drive 12 hours and be back in time for Sunday...blah, blah blah...Oh and I have more blah, blah, blah...believe me.

Well, blah, blah, blah didn't cut it with my mom. She kinda put the old guilt thing out there...and yep, I crumbled. But, I didn't go quietly. I booked one ticket for me to fly in on Thursday and out on Saturday morning because I operate on the family and fish 3-day model. Anyway, Mom was happy that I was coming, and said what a great surprise it would be for your sister Rebie. Well, like a dodo, I couldn't keep my mouth shut—Jenny can attest I'm not very good at it. I said, "Mom, I'm not coming to see Rebie, I'm coming to see you."

I had a lot more blah, blah, blah, but I was loaded for bear. I went on to say...umm, I don't recall Rebie being at my 30<sup>th</sup> or 40<sup>th</sup> birthday parties...and you know we can't be in the same room for more than 20 minutes without something causing the train to come off the track...we have polar opposite views and opinions on sports, politics and religion with the last two being particularly acrimonious. Well, Mom listened...as she always does when I go off on one of these rants. She acknowledged my frustration and we ended the phone call.

I though...phew, at least she finally gets it. She let that go a day or two before she sent the following email...an email that let me know why the film about the Amish school shooting hit me so hard...

Stan,

I am so happy you are coming and I will be at the airport when you arrive. Remember that to forgive is divine. I try to do what I think Jesus would do. He didn't just hang out with the lovely people. Love ya – Mom

In the closing of the video, the last lines said this:

The memory of that day and the challenge to forgive remains. It's not something you do just once and then it's done. Amish people have to work at this every day, we know every morning we wake up all the emotions are there from anger to grief and pain, and we have to start over every day.

It is my prayer that each of us...on this day, through an act of forgiving or accepting forgiveness, really accepting it...we might use this day as the day to start over.

Have a great Sunday, go in peace. AMEN