

SERMON ON THE MOUNT #4 – MATTHEW 5:21-22

²¹ **“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca’, is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell. ²³ “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. Matthew 5: 21-24.**

The first principle that Jesus gives is that when there is relational conflict, don't give in to hate. Don't let it escalate into hate, anger, and bitterness. Don't fight back or attack. Don't respond by calling people names or swear at them. However, Jesus was not saying that all anger is bad?

You should get angry at injustice. You should get angry when a child is abused. You should get angry and then allow that anger to result in action. However, regardless of the kind of anger, in every situation and no matter the action, it is wrong to let it lead to evil. In other words, even if it is righteous, justified anger, it is wrong to let it lead to malice or revenge.

The second principle that Jesus is wanting to communicating is that we must pursue reconciliation, even if it takes years. ²³ **“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. Matthew 5: 23-24.**

Jesus does not mince his words. I like how Dietrich Bonhoeffer comments in his book on Discipleship, **anyone who is angry toward a brother or sister, who aims harsh words at them, who scorns or slanders another in public, has, as a murderer no place before God. Alienating oneself from another person causes alienation from God. As long as we withhold service and love from our brothers and sisters, as long as he or she remains a target of our contempt, as long as a sister or brother has something against me or Jesus' community our worship and offering will remain unaccepted by God.**

However, it's not always easy to make peace with someone. Of course, one party cannot make peace alone. The apostle Paul concedes that it may be impossible if someone refuses your plea for peace. However, we must try.¹⁸ **If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Romans 12: 18.**

Of course, God says that we must seek reconciliation even if the other person does not return the favour and chooses to stay angry at you. The apostle Paul writes in Romans, ¹⁹ **Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty,**

give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Romans 12: 19-21.

Jesus says that unreconciled anger is the inner equivalency of murder, which is impossible to repay. To leave problems unreconciled is to allow the sin that has been created to continue to destroy relationships between people. It's important to remember that following Jesus's command not to murder is not accomplished by avoiding legal homicide.

²⁵ **“Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. Matthew 5: 26.** Finally Jesus says move quickly, don't delay. Don't give this sin time to take root and grow inside yourself or someone else.

I want to use your imagination for a moment. You have been driving for some time. The landscape is distinctly rural. Suddenly ahead of you, are two blinking red lights shining out of the darkness, not sure what they are. As you get closer, you see a horse drawn buggy. You slow your car and follow the hypnotic rhythm of the clip-clop of the horses' hooves as you move toward the top of a ridge and come across Mine Road. It's a back country road, with a few scattered houses on the left side and a small valley on the right.

The West Nickel Mines Amish School lies near the bottom of the valley. It's quiet and deserted now but soon will be littered with police and their vehicles. TV Trucks and reporters and Starbucks coffee cups purchased from the nearest coffee house five miles away. Now you can see the school more clearly. It's typically a one-room school sporting a cast iron bell on the roof with no calculators, microscopes, computers, electrical outlets, security cameras, or televisions.

Word of trouble in the school began spreading around 10.30 am on Monday, October 2, 2006. A distraught, sobbing teacher ran into a neighbouring Amish farmhouse with an alarming report. A man with a gun was in the school. News travelled quickly as one Amish man reported that the Amish grapevine is quicker than the internet. By 11.30am, local TV Stations were reporting a multiple shooting in an Amish school.

Something bad happened at the West Nickels Mines School. A man from the neighbourhood went crazy and shot children. Helicopters were taking children to the hospital. Thirty-two-year-old Charles Roberts was a troubled man. His job as a milk truck driver often took him into the Amish communities. He was highly introverted and only spoke to you if you spoke to him.

Short tempered and foul mouthed were many of the descriptions given by those who knew him. The morning of the shooting he had walked his kids to school. On his return he wrote out a suicide note and left it in the family house. He armed himself and drove to the school. He was angry at God for the death of his first-born daughter.

He told the girls at the school. "I'm angry with God and I need to punish some Christian girls to get even with him". Just after 11am, after hearing shots fired, police stormed the school. As they broke into the school, the killer turned the gun on himself. 10 girls lay on the floor of the school, 5 would die, and the others were critically injured.

The news of the Nickel Mines massacre spread quickly across the nation and around the world. Not sure what struck people the most, his cold-blooded violence against the girls or the fact that it happened in a place where most people thought it was safe from those sorts of attacks.

Although the schoolhouse shooting shocked the world. There was a bigger shock to come. The Amish forgave the killer and offered Grace to his family. The Amish quickly realised that the killer's widow and children were also victims of the shooting. Now, listen to this carefully, within a few hours of the shooting, some Amish people were already reaching out to the killer's family.

Over half of the mourners at the killer's funeral were Amish; the funeral director recalled the moving moment. **I watched as the Amish families of the children who had been killed came to Greet Amy Roberts and offer their forgiveness. I knew I was witnessing a miracle. A friend of the killer's widow said the forgiveness and generosity of the Amish had a powerful effect on Amy. Many Amish came to visit her. In the weeks that followed the shooting. They bought flowers to her home and they bought meals.**

Of course, once the media heard what was happening, new questions arose. How could they forgive so quickly? Did their leaders demand that they do it? Was it all a gimmick to get more money? This brought laughter from many Amish. You mean people thought we got together to plan forgiveness, laughed Katie, a 75-year-old grandmother.

Forgiveness is part of how we live explained an Amish bishop. **It was spontaneous and automatic; it's not new to us.** Many Amish who were spoken to agreed. Forgiveness and grace for the Roberts family had begun as spontaneous expressions of faith, not as mandates from the church.

A father who lost a daughter at the schoolhouse stressed again that forgiveness is more than just words. Sitting at his kitchen table. He said, **"Our forgiveness is not in our words. It's in our actions. It's not what we said but what we did. That was our forgiveness. When forgiveness arrived at the killer's home within hours of his crime, it did not appear out of nowhere".**

Rather it is woven into the very fabric of this Christian community. From faith in God, the Scriptures and history of persecution. The forgiveness coming from the Amish community became the story. It trumped over the narrative of senseless death. It didn't rob the tragedy of its horror, nor did it magically eradicate the grief of those left behind. However, it planted seeds of new hope.

The comment from sister Joan Chittister probably summed up the thinking and feeling of Christians everywhere. **"It was the Christianity we all profess but which the Amish practiced that left us so stunned". "If we don't forgive, we won't be forgiven" – Amish Carpenter.** For the Amish, the New Testament provides the pattern for their faith and spirituality. They take the words of Jesus very seriously, often quoting Christ or other New Testament texts. However, their faith can't be understood just by their members' love of scripture or their history of non-violence and their history of Martyrdom. They esteem suffering over vengeance.

All of us can read these words from the Lord's prayer, ¹² **And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us Matthew 6:12.** The Amish truly believe that their own forgiveness is bound up in their willingness to forgive others. For them, forgiveness is more than just a good thing to do, it is central to the Christian Faith. Amish spirituality is a precious heirloom, woven together over centuries and passed down with care.

In late February 2007, a new school was opened and aptly named the New Hope School. The killers widow and members of her family attended the opening. The act of forgiveness continues in their daily lives. Amy, the killers widow, drove one of the mothers to see her injured daughter recovering in hospital.

At Christmas Amish children went to her home to sing Carols. The killer's parents visited the families who had lost their children. Amish people continue to use the taxi service provided by the gunman's father. However, the pain from the tragedy continues for many. Certain images or noises still provoke anxious thoughts and feelings in the community. Two new babies have been born to parents who lost their children and help in return to a normal life. A new kind of normal as one Amish person puts it.

I will let Michael Wilkins have the last word. **Jesus reveals that the intent of the law is to nurture relationships. Jesus' disciples must have a daily urgency about maintaining then healthy life of their relationships, both with other disciples and non-disciples. Anything that we do that strips away the persons' distinctiveness of a brother or sister is sin, and it is our responsibility to become reconciled.**