

## “FORGIVENESS: AMISH STYLE”

Date: August 26, 2007

Text: Psalm 51, Matthew 18: 21-35

Our two scripture readings lift up one of the most difficult issues facing all human beings: how do we learn to forgive ourselves and forgive others? All of us will remember the terrible tragedy in the Amish community of Pennsylvania when a berserk man went into one of their schools and started shooting. What touched the nation deeply was the ability of the Amish people to offer forgiveness. Some befriended the murderer's family and others went to his funeral. When asked how they could act as they did the leaders pointed out that it was part of their tradition to practice forgiveness and they had the support of the entire community in how they reacted.

Obviously we can't duplicate the example of the Amish because our style of living is so different but I'd like to ask how we Presbyterians within our tradition and community could create similar model. The place to begin somewhat surprisingly is not talking about forgiveness in general terms but with a very personal look at our own lives. Until we recognize our own shortcomings and failures it is difficult to reach out to others. And no better place to start than with the words of the psalmist who wrote "Have mercy on me, O God, and wash me thoroughly from my iniquity." Here surely was an individual seeking forgiveness. Do you envision this person as something of a skid row character who really had hit bottom? Dr. Samuel Terrien, who many years ago wrote a marvelous book on the psalms, said that probably was not the case at all. He perceives a person who was becoming increasingly frustrated in trying to live the so-called "good life" in terms of his thoughts and actions.

Terrien's analysis comes close to home. Many church going Christians are sincerely trying to follow the teachings of Christ. They want to be more than just "decent" but at the end of the day, always feel that they have come up short. Do you at times share that feeling as you try to be a good parent or dependable spouse or friendly co-worker? So much responsibility. Do you feel like crying out in the words of a contemporary translation of the psalm?

Generous in love - God, give grace!

Huge in mercy – wipe out my bad record

I know how bad I have been. My shortcomings are wearing me down.

It is just the individual who is striving the hardest to be faithful who is apt to feel most deeply the anguish expressed in the psalm. It is just so frustrating not to be and do all that we expect of ourselves.

So what do we do? In October for the 10th year I will be leading a spiritual retreat for men in AA. They had sought an answer in a bottle of alcohol or pills but finally came to realize that was not an answer at all. Then they cried out, just as we do, "GOD HELP ME!" The psalmist dares to utter this plea because he knows a "God of tender mercies." The Hebrew word for "mercies" is "rachamin" and literally means the love of a mother for her child. Here is a case of the Bible describing our Creator in feminine terms and what an image is provided. "Like the love of a mother for her child!"

The phrase "create in me a clean heart, O God" also has tremendous implications. The Hebrew word for "create" is the same word that is used in the story of creation in Genesis 1 and 2. The prayer of the psalmist is that God will wash away his shortcomings and return him to that state of partnership that was envisioned in Genesis. This is something more than a patch up job like you might do on your car. This is something new, something clean, something that will help to blot out all that has gone before! In other words, personal confession leads to a change of heart and new attitude.

You can sense the tremendous feeling of release that pervades the writer's being as he realizes what God can do for him. As the psalm moves along, you can feel the re-creative juices of eternal love and power pouring into his life. This is now a person who will not be stuck in the past but an individual who will recognize what has been and yet be able to move on.

And moving on is not just a figure of speech but is meant to be taken literally. The normal reaction in the time of the psalmist might have been to prepare a sacrificial offering, a lamb if one were wealthy, a pigeon if one were less affluent. The sacrifice would be made in the temple in the presence of others. The psalmist, however, senses that such an outward sacrifice will not suffice. The true "sacrifice" that will be acceptable to God is a "broken spirit and contrite heart." What is called for is a change in behavior that will affect how we live each day.

Can you see how the model of forgiveness is beginning to take shape? First, there has to be an overwhelming sense of God's love in our lives, which will enable us to begin the process of forgiving others. But it all depends upon a change within. And rest assured, each of us needs to find the reservoirs within to deal with forgiveness as we think of past hurts to us and what we have done to others. There is a story about a former inmate of a Nazi concentration camp visiting a friend who had been in the same camp and had suffered the same ordeal. The man asked his friend, "Have you forgiven the Nazis?" The friend replied, "Yes, he had." Came the response: "Well. I haven't. I am still consumed with hatred for them." "In that case," the friend replied gently, "they still have you in prison."

Many of us still wrestle with past remembrances if this is a typical group of people. Some memories may be truly anguishing while others are not so big and yet so often hurt and guilt persist and become a heavy weight in our lives. I would venture the opinion that all of our lives would be brighter if we could push aside the grudges that lurk beneath the surface, the distance we feel in relationships and so much more.

We started out with the truly amazing act of forgiveness in the Amish community after the death of their children. We probably can't duplicate their experience because it comes out of generations of living in a certain cultural context. We can, however, recognize that the Christian faith calls for a certain bigness on our part. First we need to be big enough to recognize that we are not capable of living as God wants us to though we need to try. That time of confession in Sunday worship is there for a purpose. Secondly, we have to be big enough to treat other people the way that God has treated us even though that may not be easy.

Look at Psalm 51 again. The psalm begins with a cry for help. We need to ask for God's forgiveness because of our failures as parents, as friends, as lovers and God offers that forgiveness in Jesus the Christ! Then the psalmist begins to feel the cleaning power of God's amazing grace, which then creates something new in his life. He begins to look at life differently and especially his relationships with others.

"Have mercy on me, O God. Not on someone else but on me because I need it." "Cleanse and create a new heart within me" ...it can happen in your life and mine.