

Forgiveness clause: The Amish way

by [Don Kraybill](#) in the [October 31, 2006](#) issue

The blood was barely dry on the floor of the West Nickel Mines School when Amish parents sent words of forgiveness to the family of the one who had slain their children. Forgiveness? Forgiveness so quickly for the heinous crime of killing five Amish schoolgirls? How could the Amish forgive such a thing so quickly? Was it a genuine gesture or just a gimmick?

Their forgiveness was more than words. Fresh from the funerals where they buried their own children, grieving Amish families attended the October 7 burial of the 32-year-old non-Amish killer, Charles Carl Roberts IV. Of the 75 in attendance, at least half were Amish. The Amish families greeted Mrs. Roberts and her three children. She was deeply moved by their presence, according to eyewitness accounts. Plans were set to continue the conversation between the families of killer and killed. And forgiveness was more than a graveside presence: the Amish helped to establish a fund for the assassin's family.

A frequent phrase in Amish life is "forgive and forget." Like others, they will never forget. But "forgive and forget" is their mantra, their way of letting go and moving on. It's how they respond to Amish members who transgress church rules—if they confess their failures. The Amish don't argue with God.

Make no mistake: many tears were shed in Amish homes and barns. Death sears the hearts of Amish parents as any others. But they have an enormous capacity to absorb adversity—a willingness to yield to divine providence. Such religious resolve enables them to move on without the paralysis of analysis; they let the analysis rest in the hands of God.

As Anabaptists, the Amish take the life and teachings of Jesus seriously. Without formal creeds, their simple (but not simplistic) faith accents living in the way of Jesus rather than parsing the complexities of religious doctrine. Their model is the suffering Jesus who carried his cross without complaint and who, hanging on the cross, extended forgiveness to his tormentors: Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Beyond his example, the Amish try to practice Jesus' admonitions to turn the other cheek, to love enemies, to forgive seventy-times-seven times, and to leave vengeance to the Lord. They try to practice the forgiveness clause in the Lord's Prayer. As pragmatic as they are about other things, the Amish do not ask whether forgiveness works; they simply seek to practice it as the Jesus way of responding to adversaries, even enemies.

These folks do not live in the lobby of heaven. Rest assured, grudges are not always easily tossed aside in Amish life. Sometimes forgiveness is harder to dispense to fellow church members, whom they know too well, than to strangers. But despite their share of family and churchly feuds, their anger rarely flares into violence.

One might wonder how these forgiving folks can be so unforgiving of their own members who stray—excommunicating and shunning them. The Amish answer is that those who break their baptismal vows are always welcome back and will be fully forgiven if they confess their errors. But until they confess, the shunning (based on biblical teaching) is a dose of tough love to remind them of their transgression.

The Amish willingness to forgive is exemplary, but it raises many thorny questions. It may be one thing for a separatist group that eschews holding public office to forgive; but how does it work for those Christians who are helping to govern in the larger society? It may be one thing to forgive a mentally ill killer; but what about those who are not berserk, who intentionally murder or threaten to do so for political ends or personal retaliation? How does forgiveness relate to justice? If everyone forgave so quickly, would it truly transform human relations or lead to civil anarchy?

But those questions about Christian citizenship and responsibility in the broader society do not perplex the Amish as they do many of the rest of us.

Martyr voices of their Anabaptist ancestors still ring loudly in Amish ears with the message of forgiveness for those who tortured them and torched their bodies at the stake. Forgiveness is woven into the fabric of Amish faith. And that is why forgiving words arrived at the killer's home before the blood had dried on the schoolhouse walls. It is just the Amish way of doing things. Such courage to forgive jolted the watching world as much as the killing itself. The transforming power of forgiveness may be the one redeeming thing that trickled from the massacre at Nickel Mines.