

“A Resurrection Shaped Life: Forgiveness, Passion and Justice”

A Sermon for University Congregational Church

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Traditional Word

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. Matthew 18:21-22

Contemporary Word

“...but during all of those years, nobody thought to walk upstream, beyond the bend in the river, and to find out what was causing those bodies to be in the river. No one looked upstream.” Apocryphal tale

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On October 2, 2006, a shooting occurred at the West Nickel Mines School, an Amish one-room schoolhouse in the Old Order Amish community of Nickel Mines, in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. The gunman took hostages and shot eight out of ten girls (aged 6–13), killing five, before committing suicide in the schoolhouse. On the day of the shooting, a grandfather of one of the murdered Amish girls was heard warning some young relatives not to hate the killer, saying, "We must not think evil of this man." [19] Another Amish father noted, "He had a mother and a wife and a soul and now he's standing before a just God." [20] Jack Meyer, a member of the Brethren community living near the Amish in Lancaster County, explained: "I don't think there's anybody here that wants to do anything but forgive and not only reach out to

those who have suffered a loss in that way but to reach out to the family of the man who committed these acts."

A member of the gunman's family said that an Amish neighbor had comforted killers' family hours after the shooting and had extended forgiveness to them. Amish community members visited and comforted the shooter widow, his parents, and his parents-in-law. One Amish man held the murder's sobbing father in his arms, reportedly for as long as an hour, to comfort him. The Amish also set up a charitable fund for the family of the shooter. About 30 members of the Amish community attended the killer's funeral, and Marie Roberts, the widow of the killer, was one of the few outsiders invited to the funeral of one of the victims.

This event and its aftermath are often held up as one of the greatest modern examples of forgiveness and reconciliation. In a devastating situation where it would have been easy to allow hatred, retribution and blame lead their hearts, the community chose a different path—one tightly aligned to their deep and abiding Christian faith. I have to wonder aloud: would this community be capable of showing the same grace and love? I honestly can say that I don't know if I could—And I pray that I never have to find out.

The killer's widow Marie Roberts wrote an open letter to her Amish neighbors thanking them for their forgiveness, grace, and mercy. She wrote, "Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. Gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. Your compassion has

reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you."

Some commentators criticized the quick and complete forgiveness with which the Amish responded, arguing that forgiveness is inappropriate when no remorse has been expressed, and that such an attitude runs the risk of denying the existence of evil, while others were supportive. Scholars of Amish life noted that "letting go of grudges" is a deeply rooted value in Amish culture, which remembers forgiving martyrs including Jesus himself. They explained that the Amish willingness to forgo vengeance does not undo the tragedy or pardon the wrong, but rather constitutes a first step toward a future that is more hopeful.

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

There's a big difference between forgiving and reconciling.

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You know that I'm not big on this idea that we humans are in some way broken, because I think it is often used as an excuse to not try to become wholly human. But because we are human and we have to interact with other humans, we do acquire physic damage throughout our lifetimes. Some of us are able to cope with damage in positive ways and some of us do so in not-so-positive ways. And some of us

Forgiveness is the way in which we participate in the divine love that mends us.

Matthew 18:21-22 77 times

“Forgiveness involves leaning into our pain, staying with our hurt and devastation long enough to name what we are feeling, and identifying how our woundedness is diminishing our lives. Admitting that we are wounded makes us vulnerable and requires deep spiritual courage. Denial and avoidance are short-term coping mechanisms.

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A Passion for Justice

There is an old story concerning a passion for justice that goes like this: Once upon a time there was a town which was built beyond a bend in a river. One day, some of the town's children were playing by the river when they spotted three bodies floating in the water. The children ran to get help and the townsfolk quickly pulled the bodies from the river. One of the people was rescued was alive, one had already drowned and a third was critically injured and was placed in the hospital. From that day on, every day a number of bodies, alive and dead, would appear in the river, floating past the town and each day the good and charitable townspeople would do their best to rescue them or tend to them: burying the dead, assisting with the injured and helping the survivors cope with the devastation. This went on for many years, and the townspeople came to expect that each day would bring its quota of

human bodies...but during all of those years, nobody thought to walk upstream, beyond the bend in the river, and to find out what was causing those bodies to be in the river. No one looked upstream.

A passion for a just society begins when it occurs to us to go up stream—to go up the river and search for the source of the problem and work to fix that—not just deal with the consequences of the event. In 2017 the hashtag #metoo went viral with thousands upon thousands of women, across all aspects of our society, came forward with stories of sexual abuse and exploitation. The stories brought to our attention not merely a series of isolated instances of sexual violence and oppression, but a social, economic and political systems whose abiding structures debase and devalue women. And the women who shared their stories offered more than comfort and solace for their sisters victims: they sought and continue to seek change in the world—changes to our political, economic and social structures that perpetuates this violence and creates some many victims—they went upstream.

The civil rights movements of the 50's and 60's and the antiwar movements during the Vietnam War encouraged us to do the same. Black Lives Matters asks us to go upstream and find out the cause for so much human tragedy. Our house churches explored the crucial and immediate damage being inflicted upon our own neighbors here in Wichita by the systemic racism, classism and sexism in our existing structures. We're racist, classist and sexist because we are taught to be so by our institutions, organizations, our curricula even our language encourages these

demeaning and debasing attitudes towards those different from us—whether by education, social status, gender or sexual orientation and the color of our skin.

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The Need for Moral Leadership

As Christians we are called to do many things—love our neighbor, love God, protect these with less-than, challenge the status quo and push back against the desires of our Empire-loving culture. I also believe God calls us to be models of moral leadership—that is, in our day-to-day actions we need to show the world what it means to be a moral people. Now this doesn't mean we are pious do-gooders—people who are showy and pretentious with our works—I'm always impressed with the modesty our various outreach projects perform....When a success is lauded by the hygiene pantry it's always about the people served—never about the leaders of the effort—even though we know how hard they work and that they would blush at accolades—we celebrate the mission of the pantry more than any personalities involved with it—those leaders model moral leadership. They don't operate the hygiene pantry for any personal glory—goodness, we know how demanding the operation of this outreach ministry is—the leaders of this ministry do so to make the lives of our neighbors a little better—to love our neighbors and by doing so, loving God. Moral leaders show us through their actions, not their words, that living in community truly means caring for those without. And they do so passionately. This passion, this burning desire for justice, energizes us—it moves us—it inspires us.

Poets, songwriters and authors often use fire as a metaphor for passion—and we all know the benefits of fire—but there is a dangerous side to fire as well—and we all know these too. Like fire, passion can create and inspire, but also like fire, passion can destroy.

Theologians and philosophers have recognized passions' power and danger for centuries. Some ancients saw nothing but trouble in the passion, especially anger and they argued that we must maintain a complete dispassionate response to the world's problems—think Mr. Spock in the Star Trek stories. Always thinking logically and without emotion. He tries to always remain stoic and rational. But we're human, for God's sake (to paraphrase a certain doctor on the Enterprise) and passion is part of our soul. The word passion actually means “suffering, or enduring” so when we feel passion we are actually in empathy with the suffering of the world. And we all know how easy it is to sometimes let that passion overtake us. Finding balance in passion is something that our Christian faith can help us with.

It's easy to be angry—it's easy to let the righteous fire sweep over us and fill ourselves with indignation and retribution. I imagine most of us felt as I did on that terrible morning in October of 2006 when that broken human being took those Amish schoolgirls hostage and then murdered so many. I have a knee-jerk response, a reflexive response, anytime I hear of someone dying by a gun being pointed at them by another human being and their life being stolen from them. I admit and own my knee-jerk response. There are too many guns in the hands of too many broken people. Period. I own that. That's a fact. And then we gather up the pieces, a few

platitudes are spoken and promises made and then we go back to our day-to-day lives until another Columbine--or Sandy Hook or--or Hesston. My knee-jerk reaction is always the same—as I'm sure yours is. This Holy anger is understandable—even Jesus got angry—he threw the moneychangers out of the temple—that was righteous anger—in Matthew's Gospel he tells the hypocritical, politically motivated religious leaders of his day that they were like "white-washed tombs". When we follow Jesus we see that we will get angry. We will feel the need to express this righteous, holy anger at times. The challenge would be to see Jesus' example for what it is: he was able to express his anger without losing sight of the humanity and dignity of the human beings he was angry with. In one of the great paradoxes of Jesus' work on this earth was to denounce injustice and hold the unjust accountable without losing sight of the dignity of every human being. This is the example that the Amish community in West Nickels Mines, Pennsylvania showed us. This is the example of Moral leadership that each of us exhibit when we count to ten before we react to a slight. Christians are not transactional—that is, we don't demand an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth. As we know, that sort of retributive, transactional justice will leave the world blind and toothless. Moral leaders know that turning the other cheek is counter-cultural and resistant to Empire.

A life shaped by that event that occurred on a dark hill called Golgotha...the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth—is a life that is indeed changed. It is instead a life that sees the example of Jesus' moral leadership and instead of participating in the embedded cultural expectations of retributive justice we participate in the life-giving and life-changing possible in restorative justice. Justice that seeks to make

each human being more fully human—justice that restores us to community—justice that restores us to a life fully-lived in the beloved community of God.

This week, I challenge each of you to look upstream, to walk upstream where possible, and to look for the causes of injustice in your life. Let's begin working on the root causes of injustice instead of pulling more bodies out of the river—we're smart people—I bet we can figure it out! Go, walk upstream! And have a peaceful and joyful week safe in the knowledge that you are a key part of God's beloved community

AMEN

RESOURCES

Jake Owensby, *The Resurrection Shaped Life: Dying and Rising on Planet Earth*,
Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Nickel_Mines_School_shooting