Based on Matthew 18:15-17, 21-22. Forgiving Seventy Times Seven.

There was a time, back when school shootings still seemed shocking, that a community's response seemed more shocking still.

An Amish school for girls fell victim in this case. Then, the very same day, Amish neighbors visited the family of the shooter … and promptly forgave him. Amish mourners outnumbered the non-Amish at the funeral of the shooter. *Love just emanated from them,* the shooter's mother has said. *Their choice to allow life to move forward was quite a healing balm for us. And I think it's a message the world needs.*

Forgiveness, compassion, grace, mercy. In the face of pure evil. Indeed that is a message the world desperately needs. Nearly two decades later, the Amish community and the family of the shooter are friends. The father of one of the girls who was killed has said, *None of us would have ever chosen this. But the relationships that we have built through it, you can't put a price on that.*

The rest of us mere mortals may hear this story and think it insane, even though Jesus clearly tells us the Amish are right. Forgive seventy times seven Jesus says to Peter in our Lesson today, which, loosely translated, means something like *forgive and forgive and forgive until the kingdom comes*.

It is the second half of the Prayer Jesus teaches, the one that began our discussion of forgiveness last week: *Forgive us our debts/sins/trespasses*, Jesus tells us to pray, *as we forgive those indebted to us.*

Mutual forgiveness is, as I said last week, a prayer for Jubilee, an acknowledgment that *life happens* in all of its evil, as well as its glory, a confession that we are *all of us* desperate for redemption. Mutual forgiveness, as I said last week, means we push a reset button that gives everyone a second chance for shared flourishing.

Forgiveness does not mean we forget what happened. The Amish surely do not. Forgiveness does not mean we say what happened was somehow okay. It clearly was not. Forgiveness does not mean the one who has done wrong should not experience the consequences. Had the shooter lived, the Amish would have expected him to face trial and accept punishment in keeping with the law. Forgiveness simply means we choose compassion over vengeance and mercy over an ever-escalating cycle of revenge. As our friends in recovery say, forgiveness means that *I* will stop swallowing the poison pill of resentment in the hopes that it will kill *you*.

The Amish practice forgiveness as a quid pro quo: if I want to be forgiven, they say, I must practice forgiveness. If I do not forgive others, I will not be forgiven. Presbyterians practice forgiveness as a gift of grace: *because* I have been forgiven, we say, I have been granted the capacity to forgive. I am able to forgive because God - in Christ - first forgave me.

In either case, the theology of forgiveness is, in my view, far less important than the practice of it. The Amish were able to forgive the big thing because they daily practice forgiving the small things. This is the real lesson they have to teach us.

So let's do it. Take a moment to consider an experience of harm that you need to forgive. Something small, perhaps, just to make it easier. Hold the person or institution or situation in the light of your mind's heart. Can you see their humanity? Can you glimpse them with the eyes of eternity? Expand the light if you can to encompass their hopes and dreams and fears and pain. Can you wish them love? Can you wish them well? Expand the light if you can to encompass yourself. Can you breathe into the hurt? Can you welcome God's grace? Expand the light if you can to encompass creation. Can you release the situation into the arms of compassion? Can you simply *let ... it ... go ..?*

Terri Roberts, whose son turned the gun on himself after shooting the Amish girls, has said: *For the mother and father who had lost not just one but two daughters at the hand of our son, to come up and be the first ones to greet us -- wow. Is there anything in this life that we should not forgive?*