"Kinder Than the Dickens": Thoughts on Forgiveness

Shirley H. Showalter

The school shootings of October 2006 arrested the world’s attention. The contrast of innocence and violence, the mystery of the shooters’ motivations, the fact that there were five school shooting in six weeks—all of these were factors, but none can compare to the strength of the families who chose to forgive and their witness under fire. Through this tragedy in a one-room schoolhouse in Pennsylvania, the Amish, in particular, showed us the results of nearly 500 years of educating the human heart.

News stories reported that members of the Amish community almost immediately proffered forgiveness to the shooter Charles Carl Roberts IV and his family. The grandfather of some of the victims was overheard admonishing young boys, “We must not think evil of this man,” and later we learned that nearly half of those in attendance at Charles Roberts’ funeral were Amish.

The shooting in Bailey, Colorado, in which Emily Keyes was killed became the subject of a Dateline segment because her family, too, offered forgiveness to the family of the dead shooter and to the law enforcement officials who made the decision to go into the school. The Keyes family took inspiration from their young daughter’s life and final text message to them, “I love you guys” to shift the response of their community from one that might have been vengeful and angry to a community that offered love and messages of hope and kindness.

Donald Kraybill, distinguished professor at Elizabethtown College, author and commentator on Amish life, explains, “Forgiveness were sent to the killer’s family before the blood had dried on the schoolhouse floor. It was just the natural thing to do, the Amish way of doing things.” The Dateline footage of the Keyes family reflected much the same—as if there wasn’t any other option.

How can such actions be so natural for an entire community? The answers are both theological and sociological. The Amish take seriously Jesus’ outline for living from the Sermon on the Mount. They, and others inspired to forgive, do what Gandhi challenged Christians to do and what Martin Luther King, Jr., Desmond Tutu and other peacemakers have modeled.

Maybe, instead of asking “Why?” and “How can bad things happen to good people?,” we should ask a different set of questions. “How can we do a better job of bringing up children to be more loving and forgiving?” might be a beginning. “How can whole communities support their schools and the children who attend them?” is another question both the Amish and Keyes cases could inspire.

Tom Meyers, Goshen College sociologist and expert on the Amish, taught in an Amish schoolhouse 1981-82. Meyers explains that Amish education of the heart begins with adult models of kindness. “In simple and very subtle ways Amish parents teach forgiveness as much by their behavior as their words or their sacred texts.”

Meyers once gave this assignment in class: ‘If I could describe my family in one word, it would be....’” He still remembers the children’s answers, especially sixth-grader Samuel’s: “If I could describe my family with one word it would be kind. We would be kinder
than the dickens." Samuel and his Amish community prove that kindness, love, and forgiveness can be taught.

Other social science researchers have come to the same conclusion. Robert Enright, professor of human development at the University of Wisconsin, emphasizes preparing the hearts of children for the conflicts they will inherit. He has designed curricula and written a children's book on forgiveness. Similarly, schools across the country are building curricula that cultivate social and emotional intelligence, practice peer mediation, and teach alternatives to violence. We might all make a conscious commitment to act more from love than from fear. This could mean less road rage, better—and less bullying—learning environments, understanding and compassion for those who are different from us. It may even allow those in need to ask for help when they are most desperate.

We need to see, hear, tell, and feel more stories of the power of love and forgiveness. Our communities need to support parents and schools. If more young people experience adults as "kinder than the dickens," we may produce more children like Samuel and Emily Keyes and fewer adults like Charles Carl Roberts IV and Duane Morrison.

Shirley H. Showalter grew up in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, not far from Nickel Mines, site of the Amish shooting. She was formerly president of Goshen College in Indiana, in the heart of the second-largest Amish community in the U.S. and is currently vice president-programs at the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo, Michigan, which has a mission based on love and forgiveness.

Donald Kraybill, quoted in this article, is co-author of Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy, due out in September 2007 from Jossey-Bass.
