

Psalm 11
Ephesians 5:10-17

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Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333
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A TIME TO WEEP, AND A TIME TO . . .

A time to weep . . . Ecclesiastes 3:4

On Friday, under a sky as bleak as our spirits this past week, another funeral cortege of Amish horse and buggy drove through damp, bucolic farmland to a hilltop cemetery. It was the fifth burial for them this week, and with one of the surviving children in grave condition, and now uncoupled from life support, there may be more. Marian Fisher's body lay in a hand sawed wooden coffin, rocking gently on the wet road as it passed the home of Charles Carl Roberts, IV. On that spot at 8:45 a.m. on Monday morning Roberts kissed his three young daughters goodbye, put them on the school bus, and walked back into the house. There he methodically went about writing each child a letter of farewell, and one to his wife. Then with malice aforethought he gathered three guns: a Springfield semi-automatic pistol, a Ruger .30-06, and a Browning 12-gauge shotgun, two knives, a police stun gun, 600 rounds of ammunition, two cans of smokeless gunpowder, rolls of tape, wire for leg shackles, plastic handcuffs, tools, a change of clothing, lumber to bar the school house doors, and other items yet more sinister. As a *New York Times* editorial put it on Tuesday, "When Charles Roberts snapped, the tools lay ready to hand." The same can be said of the shooting of a high school principal in Cazenovia, Wisconsin, for issuing a disciplinary warning to the student, and of an armed drifter in Bailey Colorado, who took six high school girls hostage before shooting a 16-year-old.

The image of Marian Fisher's thirteen year-old body swaying silently past her killer's home, save for the click of hooves and the creak of the carriage, leaves a haunting imprint on the mind. Over her thirteen years she and Roberts must have passed on the road many times. This last time they had come face to face, he talking incoherently as he shackled the pliant children together in a line. And with a courage far beyond her adolescent years in that terrible confrontation, Marian asked something. Her younger sister, Barbie, recovering from shot wounds herself, remembers her older sister saying to Roberts, "Shoot me and leave the other ones loose." When the younger ones asked why he was doing this, Roberts answered only that he was angry with God. He had lost a child soon after its birth, and work colleagues said his demeanor changed markedly and permanently from then on. It seems also there were other issues of personal guilt and intensely powerful temptations lingering from twenty years before.

None of this adds up to anything approaching coherence for such a diabolical act. He was, as Ernie McMillan remarked in a conversation last week, simply, tragically, "Out of his mind." Little else can be said.

After the news broke, most of us went about in a fog this past week. The blogs, for the most part, sputtered their own incoherence. But then an extraordinary thing happened—after the first flood of private weeping, the grieving Amish families turned our heads away from seeking coherence, answers, explanations—as if anything rational could justify such incomprehensible evil—and led us to the opposite incomprehensible pole, *forgiveness*. This we may not comprehend either, yet something in us resonated to its essential goodness, and we found ourselves in another awe-filled place, not chaos and darkness, but the beginnings of warmth and light and healing. They went to Roberts’ widow, Marie, not with legal counsel in tow or police protection, not with questions or accusations, not seeking answers or venting grief—for they know perhaps better than we that this “thing” and its solution are finally incomprehensible—but with forgiveness, which is to say with the embrace of reconciliation. They took food to her family (for she had lost her husband, and her children were fatherless). They invited Marie to the funeral of their children, a very private affair among the Amish. As I understand, with donations that have come in from the Amish themselves, and from elsewhere, they have set up a fund for the education of Marie’s three fatherless children. One Amish went to the house of the father of the gunman, standing for an hour as a mark of respect for the father’s loss, offering forgiveness and embracing the grieving man. Others went to the larger Roberts family to sit at table with them and begin the healing. Even so, this journey in healing is going to be, as one Amish historian put it last week, “a marathon, not a sprint.”

In doing all these things the stricken Amish families had moved beyond the point of forgiveness to empathy for those from whose family the terror came. They did what is hardest for us to do when violence, especially coldly premeditated violence and death come so close to home. As Steven Gimbel, a professor of ethics at Gettysburg College, wrote in the *Inquirer* this past Friday,

These are people still able to keep themselves open to the pain of others. . . . [to feel] empathy, the ability to understand and feel the anguish of someone else, the deep sense that other people are, in fact, people. . . . I hope that we can learn a lesson from them. In a world where we begin ‘a war on terrorism’ because we became victims of the hatred of others, we need to learn to seek justice like these Amish families, who were able to fully feel their own anger, grief and despair, while allowing others to retain their humanity.

We also *have* to come to terms with the enabling of a culture of personal weaponry that bears no relationship to need or security—firearms capable of mass destruction—that hold the nation, its schools and colleges, hospitals, art galleries, even places of family recreation, hostage to the fear of infiltration. It is a culture that sends messages to the young, the impressionable, and the insecure that guns are a legitimate way of resolving grievances. We really do need to ask ourselves in private and in public discourse, what sort of country we wish to be: one increasingly held hostage to our own insecurities that promote insularity and retreat behind domestic and public security systems, constant childhood supervision, and fortress-like public buildings; or a nation with communities intent on building trust and reconciliation locally and globally.

The latter does work. Trust, reconciliation and healing *before* situations have a chance to fester, do work, and can have profound social consequences, as the grieving Amish families have shown. These are radical responses (who would ever have thought to accuse the Amish of being radical!). And they are not without risk or the appearance of failure. Jesus is a perfect example.

But if we can find it within ourselves to commit to creating a world worthy of our children's inheritance, rather than dithering over success or failure, our children may have a chance.

If you want to begin that journey, come to the Carriage House at 11:15 this morning and write a letter in advocacy of something you want to see changed—like reversing environmental decline, or an issue made just—like the world community's virtual abandonment of Darfur, or some inequity set right, or someone falsely incarcerated being released. It does not matter what it is. Perhaps you feel passionately that there should be less "No Right on Red" restrictions, or have your stance on the war in Iraq you need to have heard. Not attempting to make a difference is not a Christian option. We are not here to agree on everything we do. If we were, not much would get done. I challenge you to make a difference, and do it now. If you have a genuine commitment after church, or want to research your options, talk to the folks in the Carriage House, but do something that promotes a greater good. Do it as a memorial gift to the slaughtered Amish girls. Do it for our children. Don't let yourself off the hook.

If you stand as one grieving, against whom some injustice has been done, ask yourself what previously unimaginable act lies within you to promote healing by doing some unexplored good toward a loved one, or a former friend or colleague. But do the unexpected radical good, like the Amish family that lost a child yet embraced and fed the family of her assassin. This is the faith we claim in Jesus in action.

Things can change. Relationships that once were full of hatred and distrust have changed when ordinary people made extraordinary commitments to make a difference by overcoming their natural negative inclinations. Perhaps three years ago, it may have been "Sixty Minutes" that reported on the American parents of a young woman who had been killed in South Africa by two youths. They traveled to South Africa to seek out the perpetrators and become reconciled to them. They did indeed find them, met with them, and left after long and tearful embraces on both sides, and brought unimagined healing to themselves and the young men.

More recently, in the bitter fight between Israel and Lebanon over hostage taking that killed hundreds on both sides, leaving many families bitter and grieving, an Israeli man was killed by a Palestinian rocket. When his brother learned that a Lebanese Arab man desperately needed eye surgery, he made arrangements for his Jewish brother's eyes to be given to the Arab man. The two met at the hospital after the surgery, talked, offered thanks and good wishes, and embraced in goodwill. If you care to read dozens of similar stories (the two cited are not among them) go to theforgivenessproject.com.

God has no part in the promotion of the Amish tragedy. Yet how quickly our grieving God—grieving over Charles Robert's anger toward God, for the loss of the children's life, for Charles Robert's life, for the grieving Amish families, the grieving widow, a grieving community and world (this story is everywhere)—how quickly God stepped into the breach through faithful followers to promote healing. So goodness flowed from even this hideous thing. And so came a way toward heaven out of a hell on earth.

I seem to close more frequently these days with poetry, for the poet seems to speak for us when we cannot well speak for ourselves. When Emily Dickinson wrote "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" a century and a half ago, she might have had thirteen year-old Marian Fisher in mind, or any of the occupants of the other four coffins that passed the same house last week on their way to the cemetery.

Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—

The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality.

We slowly drove—He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility—

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—

Or rather—He passed Us—
The Dews drew quivering and chill—
For only Gossamer, my Gown—
My Tippet—only Tulle—

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice—in the Ground—

Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity—

Amen