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Life-giving Formation

Over the summer I read *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy*¹, an account of the 2006 murder by a deranged gunman of five Amish school girls in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. The book returns repeatedly to the question of how, in the face of this horrible wrong, the families of the girls and the whole Amish community were able to forgive the murderer and extend grace to his family so quickly and authentically. The writers speak of the deeply rooted spiritual formation of the Amish people in the conviction that our forgiveness as children of God depends directly on our ability to extend to others the same forgiveness God offers us. To be faithful as a Christian is to live and behave as Jesus did.

One of the most important texts for the Amish community is Matthew 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount. Within this text, the Jesus Prayer, or Lord's Prayer, is most prominent. A young Amish business owner summed it up: "We don't think we can improve on Jesus' prayer. Why would we need to? We think it's a pretty good, well-rounded prayer. It has all the key points in it."(p.94) Answering a question about their forgiveness, a minister stated, "The Lord's Prayer plays a big part in our forgiveness. If we can't forgive, then we won't be forgiven."(p.91)

The Lord's Prayer is said in every Amish church service, and in morning and evening prayers in every home. It is the first prayer children learn as they begin to speak, and when they start school they stand every morning at the start of the day and recite the prayer. The prominence of the Lord's Prayer in the daily life of the Amish people profoundly shapes their spirituality and their day to day life. Being immersed in the prayer and saying over and over 'forgive... as we forgive...' helps creates an almost instinctive response when bad things do happen. This story makes me wonder what texts are forming us and shaping us spiritually.

Much more could be said, and the writers of this book do. I simply want to share how provocative the experience of reading this story has been for me. Not only have I reflected at length on my own ability to forgive and my attitude towards it, but I have been reminded again of the importance of being spiritually shaped by the right things, by the most important things. I pray for grace to be formed and transformed in my life by living in scripture, praying as Jesus prayed, and listening intently to the voice of God who moves even in my sphere of life and work if I only learn to take note.

NOTES:

- 1. Preaching Resource:** Recently one of our seasoned MC Canada pastors recommended a prime online resource for preaching. You'll find it at www.interactivepreaching.net I welcome feedback on your experience with this resource.
- 2. Spiritual Directors:** The directory of Mennonite Spiritual Directors was recently updated: www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/47. You are encouraged to refer to this list as you help to connect church members to spiritual guidance and prayer resources in your region.
- 3. MWC Global Youth Summit:** Young people are a major force in the church but tend to be under-represented in global church gatherings. The Mennonite World Conference young adult committee (AMIGOS) is planning the second Global Youth Summit (July 10-14, 2009) in conjunction with Assembly Gathered

1 <http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/resourcecentre/ResourceView/2/9997>

in Asuncion, Paraguay (July 14-19, 2009) to voice hopes and concerns for their lives and the future of the church. You are invited to assist young people from your congregation to attend the Global Youth Summit where they will discuss church and faith issues relevant to each continent, and ways to expand the impact of younger Christians in their constituencies. Information and registration materials are available at www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/751

4. Welcome to Karen Martens Zimmerly: We welcome Karen Martens Zimmerly to the position of Denominational Minister and Director of Leadership Development. Karen began her work on September 15 and is eager to meet and interact with you on leadership matters. You may contact Karen at: kmzimmerly@mennonitechurch.ca; phone: 1.204.888.6781 or 1.866.888.6785, ext. 118.

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