

## ***Extravagant Heart***

*a sermon delivered by The Rev. Scott Dalgarno on September 17, 2017  
based on Matthew 18:21-35*

On news of the death of Pope John Paul II in 2005 a man named Rogers Cadenhead, a self-described “domain hoarder,” registered the domain name, BenedictXVI.com before the new pope’s name was announced. Cadenhead had picked the name before Rome had any idea it would be chosen by their new pope.

As you may know, a domain name can be lucrative. Someone else had secured the name, **PopeBenedictXVI** and ended up selling it for \$16,000 on ebay. Rogers Cadenhead, however, did not want money. A Catholic himself, he was happy to give the name to the church. He said selling it would only anger 1.1 billion fellow Catholics and his own grandmother.

He did ask the church for three things in return, however.

- 1) one of the pope’s hats – the mitre.
- 2) a free vacation stay at the Vatican Hotel
- 3) Complete absolution, no questions asked, for the third week of March back in 1987.

Makes you wonder what made that week so special.

We’re talking this morning about forgiveness. Peter asked Jesus, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” No doubt thinking that seven is a lot of times.

Peter is like the lawyer who once asked Jesus, “who is my neighbor?” not to find out who he could help, but in order to be able to keep the bar as low as possible. “Isn’t my neighbor just someone I share a fence with? Help me draw a reasonable boundary,” the lawyer was saying.

No Jesus will have none of it. “I tell you not seven but seventy times seven.” Do the math.

Well, thinking about that just wears me out. Say you have a lunch date with a friend, and you have to clear your calendar to see him. And then you show up ten minutes early and you wait and wait and find that you’ve been stood up. And you leave after a half-hour thinking, “well, he better have a good excuse.”

Later that afternoon he calls and he is all contrition – he says he has never learned to use the calendar in his smartphone properly. “Can we still do it?” he wants to know. “Of course,” you say, putting your feelings aside – and you set another date . . . and the whole thing happens all over again.

Forgiving someone once is one thing, but are you going to give him a third chance? Wouldn't that make you feel like a ninny? Would that make you co-dependent? How about seventy times seven times? Come on?

We prefer relationships where what we are willing to give is matched by what the other is willing and able to give. Who wants a one-way relationship where one person does all the giving? Boundaries are important. That is the part of us Jesus is speaking to in this passage today. The part that lives by common sense and common courtesy and expects the same from everyone else.

Well, as he often does, Jesus answers Peter's question with a story; a story about a king who wants to settle accounts with his servants, many of whom owe him money. He begins with one who owes him a tremendous debt. And that man begs for additional time to pay. It is granted by the merciful lord – but that man goes out and demands the small amount he is owed by someone who, in turn, begs for the same grace his creditor had been given. But what happens? The creditor refuses.

Then he, that creditor, is summoned by *his* Lord and excoriated for not passing on the same graciousness. "So my heavenly father will also do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart," says Jesus.

Now, on the surface this seems to be a simple lesson about the Golden Rule. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, or more exactly, do unto others as you would have GOD do unto you, because, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart your heavenly father will have you hauled off to jail and throw away the key.

Frankly, that reading of this story leaves me cold. I mean, if the only reason to forgive my neighbor is to save my own neck then it is NOT something I am doing out of love, it's something I am doing out of fear, isn't it? Does that sound like Jesus to you? Not to me. That's not how he operated.

No, most of us find the power to forgive by our own experience of being forgiven. And we have all been forgiven freely, inexplicably, by someone. Someone has chosen to wipe our slate clean when we have merited less – they decided to forgive us because they decided that what was most important was our relationship, not the damage we have done, nor the anger that they have felt toward us.

Let me pause a moment here and note that anger is a big deal. Let me fine tune that statement. For some people, anger is a drug.

I heard of a man who went to see a therapist about a problem he had with anger. His outbursts were affecting his work and his home life. If nothing was done he was going to lose his job and his family. So, under that pressure he sought help.

The therapist, seeking to engage the man's imagination said, "Tell me what you think your life would look like if you were willing to give up your anger." The man thought a moment, and then he said, "If I give up my anger, what I would have left?"

The problem is that for some, anger is so exciting, so enlivening, that forgiveness can seem like some luke-warm surrender.

Mother Teresa was once asked why she did the work she did. She said, "Because I know there is a little Hitler inside of me."

Maybe we should think of anger as a kind of flashing yellow light. "Caution!" it says, something is going on here. Slow down and see if you can figure out what it is.

But, hey, who slows it down when they're in a fit? That takes self-control and a pretty strong will. It can help to know in your bones that while anger is usually counterproductive, forgiveness can have real power.

Now how could that be? Let me tell you.

When you choose to forgive other people and ask for forgiveness back, it often disarms them. Nobody knows how to act anymore because forgiveness is an act of transformation. In fact, it changes people the way anger only wishes it could.

Now, let me step back here a little. What, after all, is forgiveness, anyway? I mean, when push comes to shove. I'm not talking about blowing something off someone did to you because you don't want to deal with it or with them. I'm talking about real forgiveness. That takes work.

One writer has said that forgiveness is NOT "putting the other person on probation."

We may have thought we have forgiven another only to catch ourselves waiting impatiently for evidence that the person's behavior merits our clemency. Right?

Secondly, to forgive is NOT to excuse unjust behavior. Forgiving is not necessarily forgetting. Here's why.

Some years ago I read a book about forgiveness by a man named David Augsburger. I was so impressed with his take on it I asked him to come to the church I was serving at the time to speak to us.

David told us that to say that “the Christian thing to do is to forgive totally, is to speak too glibly about forgiveness.”

Then he told us a story about a woman who had been abused by her father from the age of 5 to 12. She had come to the place where she could actually forgive her father for that. It took a long time but she got there with him. But then her father asked if he could take her very young daughters to Disneyland. She said no. “Absolutely not.”

“But,” said her father, “if you say you forgive me, then why then can't I take my granddaughters to Disneyland for the weekend?”

We can forgive, but we can't always afford to forget. It would be wrong to.

One Greek word for forgive is *aphieimi* which literally means, to drop, to open your hand, to just let go.

Forgiveness is therefore not about warm fuzzy feelings. Sometimes we feel we can't forgive someone who has been brutal to us – someone who has stolen our childhood or hurt a child, or anyone we love. Forgiveness can't be about forgetting, but it can be about letting go. Some people are better at this than others.

Nearly 11 years ago, you may remember, a shooter entered a one-room Amish school in Nickel Mines, Pa. and the tragedy ended with five students dying as well as the killer himself.

Within hours, the Amish community forgave the killer and his family. News of the instant forgiveness stunned the outside world – almost as much as the incident itself did.

Many pundits, like those on the evening news, lauded the Amish, but others worried, understandably, that hasty forgiveness might be emotionally unhealthy.

I mean, members of the Amish community began offering words and hugs of forgiveness when the blood was barely dry on the schoolhouse floor. An Amish grandmother laughed when asked if the forgiveness was orchestrated. In answer, she said, “You mean, people actually thought we had a meeting to *plan* our forgiveness?”

As the father of a slain daughter explained, “Our forgiveness was not our words, it was what we did.” Members of the community visited the gunman's widow at her home with food and flowers and hugged members of his family. There were a few words, but it was primarily their hugs, gifts, and mere presence that communicated Amish forgiveness.

Of the 75 people at the killer's burial, about half were Amish, including parents who had buried their own children a day before. Amish people also contributed to a fund for the shooter's family.

For most people, a decision to forgive comes – if ever – at the end of a long emotional journey that may stretch over months if not years. But the Amish invert the process. Their religious tradition predisposes them to be forgiving almost before an injustice occurs.

Amish faith is grounded in texts like the one we read this morning and the teachings of Jesus to love our enemies. They believe in leaving vengeance in the hands of God. A father who lost a daughter in the schoolhouse said, "Forgiveness means that we give up the right of revenge."

For many today, that's very counter-intuitive. Living in a world like ours where religion seems to fan the flames of vengeance more often than to curb it, the Amish response is certainly a welcome contrast to a barrage of suicide bombings fueled by religiously driven rage.

I wonder how many Americans, in the end, saw the Amish response as something to emulate, or as just a noble (but impossible) ideal.

I'd guess the answer to that question lies somewhere in the middle. Sure, we were awed by the Amish, but, at the same time, we know that had our own children been the ones to suffer, our response would have been rooted in rage rather than grace.

That's an honest perspective, but it's also a problematic. It assumes that revenge is the natural response and forgiveness is reserved for people like the Amish who spend their lives stifling troubling emotions.

Some who said that the Amish forgave the gunman "too quickly" assumed that Amish people deny the basic human need to get even. But I wonder if maybe our true human need is to find ways to move *beyond* anger and revenge for the sake of our own sanity.

It has been said that to marry yourself to bitterness and hate for the rest of your life is like taking poison in hopes that the person who wronged you will die.

What we learn from the Amish is that whether we choose to move on from tragic injustice or long every day for revenge, is culturally formed. For the Amish, the only healthy way to live is to offer forgiveness — and to offer it quickly.

That offer to forgo vengeance, does not undo the tragedy or pardon the wrong. It does, however, constitute a first step toward a future that is more hopeful, and potentially less violent than it would otherwise be.

How might the rest of us move in that direction? I mean, look, we live in a culture that nourishes revenge and mocks grace.

Some hockey fans complain that they haven't gotten their money's worth if the players only skate and score without throwing off their gloves at least once and a get in a wild fist-fight.

Violent video games are everywhere, and the ones that seemed totally outrageous ten years ago are said to be tame by the standards of today. And many blockbuster movie plots revolve around heroes who wreak revenge with a merciless rampage.

Why should we be surprised that hate took Charlottesville, VA hostage a month ago? America has an anger problem. Anger is driving so much of our politics these days, no matter where you stand on the issues.

Much of American Christianity has an anger problem too, and it just underscores how out of step it is with all that Jesus teaches. The Amish ways may be difficult but they stand as proof that none of this is necessary.

So, how can we create communities in which those we differ with are treated as members of the human family and not demonized?

I can't say that I know, but we as individuals *can* begin heading in that direction by choosing, ourselves, to relinquish bitterness toward one person. You might try this as an experiment. See if you can let go of the resentment you hold for one person whose abused of you. One person. Just ... let it go, maybe.

You know, the Latin word for mercy is revealing: it is *elieson*. It means, to unbind.

When we refuse to forgive it's as if we hold another person firmly in the bondage of our anger and resentment. That takes a lot of effort and commitment.

Years ago, Neil Douglas Klotz imagined what the Lord's Prayer would have sounded like when Jesus recited it the first time in his own language, Aramaic. He then translated that into English. I will close with that portion of Jesus's prayer.

*Loose the cords of mistakes binding us,  
As we release the strands we hold of other's guilt.  
Lighten our load of secret debts  
As we relieve others of their need to repay  
Forgive our hidden past, our own secret shames,  
As we attempt to forgive what others hide*

Amen

How might those communities enable their members to see offenders, as well as victims, as persons with authentic needs?

For the Amish, gracious remembering involves habits nurtured by memories of Jesus forgiving his tormenters while hanging on a cross.

... When thirteen-year-old Marian said “shoot me first” in the schoolhouse, and when adults in her community walked over to the killer’s family with words of grace a few hours after her death, they were acting on those habits. And just as surely their actions at Nickel Mines will be recounted around Amish dinner tables for generations to come, creating and renewing memories about the power of faith to respond in the face of injustice — even violence — with grace.

In a nation where some Christians use scripture to fuel retaliation, the Amish response tells us that religion can inspire goodness, forgiveness, and grace.

As I said earlier, when you choose to forgive other people and ask for forgiveness back, it often disarms them. Nobody knows how to act anymore because forgiveness is an act of transformation. In fact, it changes people the way anger and revenge only wish they could in their unholy dreams.

Amen

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One Greek word for forgive is *aphieimi* which means, literally, to drop, to open your hand, to just let go. Forgiveness is therefore not about warm fuzzy feelings. Sometimes we feel we can't forgive someone who has been brutal to us – someone who has stolen our childhood or hurt a child. But forgiveness *can* be about letting go.

Running against that grain, finding alternative ways to imagine our world, ways that in turn will facilitate forgiveness, takes more than individual willpower. We are not only the products of our culture, we are also producers of our culture. We need to construct cultures that value and nurture forgiveness. In their own way,

the Amish have constructed such an environment. The challenge for the rest of us is to use our resources creatively to shape cultures that discourage revenge as a first response.

There are no simple answers to these questions, though any answer surely will involve the habits we decide to value, the images we choose to celebrate, and the stories we remember.

Now, I grant you, that is an extreme example, but then remember, Jesus is saying the God required need to forgive should be pretty extreme: 70 x 7.

And, it should never be glib: Frederick Bueckner says, "To forgive somebody is to say, one way or another, 'You have done something unspeakable, and by all rights, I should call it quits between us. Both my pride and my principles . . . demand no less. However, though I make no guarantee that I will be able to forgive what you've done and though we may both carry the scars for life, I refuse to let that stand between us. I still want you for my friend.'"