

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

MT 18:21-35

Some of you may remember “West Nickel Mines School Shooting” which occurred in 2006. It might be better known as “Amish School Shooting.” The shooting occurred in a one-room schoolhouse in the Old Order Amish community in Pennsylvania. In this small and peaceful Amish country, a gunman took hostages and shot eight out of ten girls aged 6-13, killing five before committing suicide in the schoolhouse.

The perpetrator was a milk truck driver who served Amish farms in that area. He himself had three children and a wife. Nine years earlier his wife gave birth to their first child, a baby girl. However, the baby died after living only 20 minutes. Apparently, his daughter’s death affected him greatly. He was angry at God and never forgave God for her death, and eventually planned to get revenge. Before he shot the Amish girls, He told the girls, “I’m going to make you pay for my daughter.” And according to the report, one of the girls, 13-year old Marian, said, “Shoot me first.” Roberts began shooting each of the girls before finally shooting himself.

In the hours and days following this tragedy, an unexpected and amazing story developed. The Amish community and whole people who heard about this tragedy were shocked. However, in the midst of their grief over the tragedy, the Amish community did not cast blame or contemplate revenge. Instead, they showed a great example of forgiveness. They reached out with grace and compassion toward the murderer's family.

On the day of the shooting, a grandfather of one of the murdered Amish girl warned some young relatives not to hate the murderer. He said, "We must not think evil of this man."

That same day, the Amish community members visited and comforted the murderer's widow, parents, and parents in law. One Amish man held the murderer's sobbing father in his arms for an hour to comfort him. Furthermore, about 30 members of the Amish community attended the murderer's funeral and invited the widow to the funeral of one of the victims. The widow wrote a letter to the Amish community; "Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing so desperately need. Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world."

Many people who heard this amazing story asked, “How could they forgive such a terrible and unprovoked act of violence against innocent lives?” And many of us probably think the same questions in our mind. As many of us have experienced often in our lives, forgiveness is not an easy thing to do even with a small thing.

In today’s gospel, Jesus urges us to forgive our brothers or sisters who sin against us for seventy-seven times. Here, the number seventy-seven is significant. In the scripture, the number seven is used as the symbol of perfection. Therefore, when Jesus says about forgiving seventy-seven times, he talks about the perfect forgiveness. And this is impossible because of our human weaknesses. Then how can we follow the teaching of God about forgiveness?

We need to remember the truth that only God is perfect. And God’s forgiveness of our sin is the perfect forgiveness. Our forgiveness for one another is our participation to the perfect forgiveness of God. Forgiveness begins with God. It was not about us. It’s about God. We need God’s help to

forgive. Furthermore, We do not choose to forgive. We only choose to share the forgiveness we have already received.

Then we choose again, and then again, and then yet again.

Moreover, Jesus' invitation to the perfect forgiveness is also His invitation to healing. As the First Reading says, wrath and anger are hateful things. They are obstacles in God's healing process for us, and indeed they worsen wounds and pain in our hearts. Steven McDonald, a police officer who was shot by a teenager then became paralyzed by the incident said

“I forgave the shooter because I believe the only thing worse than receiving a bullet in my spine would have been to nurture revenge in my heart.”

Therefore, my friends, if you are holding wrath and anger toward any of your brothers or sisters, ask God to help you to forgive them and ask Him to heal your wounds. When we ask God's help, He will gradually lead us to participate into the perfect forgiveness of God. He will heal our wounds with His unfathomable love and mercy. The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion.