



The Transforming Power of Forgiveness

SESSION 2



*You can say, if they come to kill me,
that I forgive and bless those who do it."*

Archbishop Oscar Romero

Focus for this Session

- Forgiving as Christ forgave
- Forgiving others as we ourselves have been forgiven
- The transforming power of forgiveness for us both as individuals and as a community.

GATHER

Introductions

*If new members have joined the group since session one, allow a few moments for introductions. Invite the new member/s to talk about their interest in joining an **ARISE Together in Christ** small community.*

Opening Prayer

Leader Let us spend a moment of quiet
in order to become more aware of God's presence ...
... God's presence in each of us
and in the community.

Leader We join in Spirit
with all those who recognize Jesus as Savior Lord,
and pray:
God our loving Father,
enlighten us with your word.
Strengthen us to take up the cross daily,
and be ever more transformed
in the image of Christ, your Son,
through whom we make this prayer.

All Amen.



Suggested Song
Loving and Forgiving

Living Our Faith

Share briefly your experience of putting into effect the action you chose after the last session.

BREAKING OPEN OUR STORY

Reflection

In the fall of 2006, two news stories came out of a small community in Pennsylvania.

The first was, sadly, typical of the top line news stories on many days: a senseless killing. A 32 year-old man had entered the one-room Amish schoolhouse in Nickel Mines. He ordered the teacher and the boys to leave, but kept the ten girls. He tied their legs. When it became clear that he was preparing to shoot them, execution style, the oldest hostage, a 13-year-old, said, "Shoot me first and let the little ones go." He opened fire on all of them, killing five and critically injuring the other five. As police stormed the building, he shot himself.

Journalists descended on the small town, probably many of them veterans of stories that were similar, although perhaps different in scale. What newspaper and television reporters discovered and relayed to the world was to transform that awful story into a moment of grace.

The deeper, transforming story was first how the Amish parents brought words of forgiveness to the family of Charles Roberts, the man who had killed their daughters.

The story evolved further when the parents of Marion Fisher invited Roberts' widow to their daughter's funeral, and when the grieving Amish parents attended the killer's burial, deeply touching his widow, not just by their presence but also by the way they greeted her and her children. There had been an outpouring of support for the Amish families, expressed in part by people making donations to the community. The Amish set aside part of this to support a fund for the Roberts family. The story was transformed from one of violence and tragedy to one of Christ-like forgiveness. It was a story that the world seemed hungry to hear, making the front pages in newspapers throughout the world. By the end of October it had appeared in about 3,000 news stories worldwide.

Yet a common strain in the reporting was to present this as "surprising" and even "incredible." Was it really possible to forgive, particularly in view of the nature of the tragedy? The surprise was increased because of both the speed with which forgiveness was offered, and how it was then demonstrated with such calm consistence.

The apostle Paul met with the same reaction of incredulity when he preached the story of how an innocent man accepted humiliation, humiliation to death, death on a cross. And when this was at its worst, prayed "Father, forgive them ..."

Powerful demonstration of forgiveness

“ I think the most powerful demonstration of the depth of Amish forgiveness was when members of the Amish community went to the killer's burial service at the cemetery. Several families, Amish families who had buried their own daughters just the day before were in attendance and they hugged the widow, and hugged other members of the killer's family.”

Donald Kraybill, co-author of
*Amish Grace: How Forgiveness
Transcended Tragedy.*

Paul acknowledges that to the world the cross is indeed folly.

For us, the cross presents a paradox. This instrument of death has become an instrument of love. It was the love of God, made present through the sacrifice of Jesus, that enabled something synonymous with judgment and death to become a symbol of pardon, mercy, and new life.

This is the story we make our own in baptism and celebrate above all at Easter ... precisely because of its power to transform, first us, and then through us, others.

Invitation to Share

Take a few moments of silence to reflect on one of the following questions. Then share your reflections.

1. What touches you most about the Amish response to the tragedy?
2. Share an experience of forgiveness in your own life (either of offering forgiveness or being forgiven).

BREAKING OPEN GOD'S STORY

The Word of God

Sometime before the meeting, the leader asks a member of the group to be prepared to proclaim the passage from Paul's Letter to the Philippians.

Philippians 3:17–4:1

Christ will transform our bodies ...

Reader The Word of the Lord.

All **Thanks be to God.**

Reflect

Moment of silent reflection

- What word, phrase, or image from the scripture reading touches your heart or speaks to your life?

Invitation to Share

The leader invites those who so wish to echo a key word or phrase that touched them from the Scripture passage.

Reflection

The gospel reading for the Second Sunday of Lent is always an account of the Transfiguration. The story of this mysterious episode is a clear invitation for us to reflect on how baptism is a transforming moment in our lives but also a challenge to ask how well we are living our new life in Christ, and how we are called to bring the power of that transformation to others.

The gesture of forgiveness we explored together in the first reflection certainly had a transforming effect. What enabled the Amish parents to offer forgiveness so quickly?

Part of it is surely taking very seriously the advice that comes at the beginning of today's scripture reading, expressed very personally by Paul ("imitate me"). It may help us to understand the force of his words if we recognize that Paul was sharing his faith from prison, where he had been confined for preaching a Christ who had died and had risen.

By warning us not to be "enemies of the cross of Christ," Paul is inviting us to be friends of the cross of Christ. This is the same letter that gives us the text of the earliest known Christian hymn (Philippians 2:6-11; explored in Season Two, session six). We might imagine Paul, in prison, singing this song to encourage himself, affirming in his own moment of suffering the central great belief in the transforming power of the cross: Christ, though innocent, accepts the tragedy that the cross brings, and in so doing, converts it into the instrument of our forgiveness.

This is what makes Jesus "Savior" and "Lord." And because by baptism we are plunged into Christ's death with him, this makes us "citizens of heaven." Citizens are those who live together under the same set of rules; in baptism we commit to living by the set of rules that flow from our "heavenly" citizenship.

These rules are clearly set out for us in Christ's teaching by what he says, but even more forcefully by what he himself does. We are called to model our lives on both.

These are the rules that the Amish seem able to take to heart. We may regard some of the Amish customs as too literal, but what is surely worthy of imitation

"Forgiving one another ..."

“

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

Ephesians 4:32 [NRSV]

is how they look to the model of Christ, who carries his cross without complaint, and whose dying words are “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” The model of

Christ who taught us how to pray the Lord's Prayer, with the intercession “Forgive us, as we forgive ...”

Millions of other Christians take these words on their lips, and yet how many of us must admit that we may not have responded with such instinctive forgiveness as did the Amish. Their secret is a willingness to let their lives, down to their reactions, be shaped by the Gospel.

Of course, it is true that the Amish live in particularly close-knit communities that have a tradition of mutual support. The magnificent barn-raising scene in the film *Witness* encapsulates this better than words. Yet there are words on which this spirit and tradition are firmly based: “Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

All of this (the strong community spirit and an explicit reference to Christ as model) makes the expression of forgiveness a natural reaction for the Amish. This does not mean it requires any less courage. Still less does it mean that they escaped the emotional pain and anguish that this tragedy brought them, as children, as parents, as a community. What is remarkable is that their Christian faith has trained them not to let that pain get in the way of expressing forgiveness.

There is another intriguing feature to this gesture of forgiveness. Do any of us remember the names of the families who lost their daughters? We remember them rather as “the Amish,” not in some impersonal, anonymous sense, but because it was the gesture of an entire community.

That, we believe, is what baptism means; that we become members of a community not just centered on Christ, but sharing his new life so that we make present “the Body of Christ.” Today’s Scripture invites us to think of what happens to the physical body of Christ—humiliation transformed into glory—also happening to the Body of Christ, the community of all those baptized. Yes, in baptism we make our own the story of the cross, the story of dying to live again, the story of humiliation being transformed into glory. The fullness of that glory yet awaits us. Meantime, every act of Christ-like forgiveness is a sacrament, a making real of the transforming power we celebrate at Easter—but a transforming power we are called to make real in our lives so that it is also real for others.

Exercise in forgiving someone else (even if that person is not present)

1. Write about a time or incident that you wish to forgive someone.
 - a. Write out all the thoughts and feelings associated with this event, the more detail the better.
2. Think about ways that you can take ownership of your actions.
 - a. When thinking of your actions, do you hold onto resentment to keep the other person beneath you? Do you blame them for the feelings you feel?
 - b. How can you begin to take responsibility for your feelings and actions in the future?
3. Think of a variety of ways that you can seek forgiveness from the other party.
4. Forgive them in your heart and mind and if appropriate, plan how to forgive them personally.
 - a. If necessary, also think of ways to avoid being hurt by this person or others in the future.

Repeat the exercise for as many people as you wish to forgive.

Peter Murphy
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(from *The Power of Forgiveness*
online resources)

Invitation to Share

Take a few moments of silence to reflect on the following questions. Then share your reflections.

1. What do you think is the spiritual source of the forgiveness the Amish were able to offer so spontaneously?
2. Today's scripture reading talks of how the body of our humiliation will be transformed into a body of glory. In what ways does forgiveness contribute to transforming the community?
3. Toward whom do you need to make a clear gesture of forgiveness? How will you do this in the coming week?

INVITATION TO ACT

Sharing and being together in a small Christian community fosters growth in our faith and in our spirituality. But no communal sharing is complete without a serious commitment to putting our faith into practice.

In this session we have reflected on the transforming power of forgiveness: to what kind of action does this inspire us?

Some Suggestions

1. Decide how you can build up and strengthen your ability to respond in the Christ-like way of saying "I forgive." For example: in your family or at work, what will you do this week to promote a readiness to say "I'm sorry"?
2. As a small group, watch the DVD *The Power of Forgiveness* (produced by Journey Films). It explores several stories of forgiveness including the Amish one. A companion website offers materials to help reflection and discussion: www.thepowerofforgiveness.com
3. Pray for someone who has offended you or whom you have offended.

4. Before we come to the Table of the Lord to receive communion, the Church invites us to make the Sign of Peace. What will you do this week to make the Sign of Peace you offer at the Sunday Eucharist more genuine?

Closing Prayer

Leader God and Father of us all,
 you have forgiven our sins.
 You give us your peace.
 Help us to forgive each other
 and to work together to bring your peace to the
 world.

All **Amen.**

Leader Let us now pray together to God our Father
 in the words Christ gave us,
 praying in particular for God's forgiveness
 and for the strength to forgive others.

All **Our Father, ...**



Suggested Song
Transfigure Us, O Lord

Looking Ahead

Prepare for the next faith-sharing session by reading over Session Three.

In particular:

- Read the "**Focus for this Session**" (on page 31).
- Read the gospel passage: **John 2:13-25**.