

**The Amish Tragedy and the Gospel Teaching About Children**  
**27<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – B**  
**October 8, 2006 – (Mark 10:2-16)**

A combination of inspiration and sadness grabbed our souls last week. The Plasma TV generation was glued to their sets watching unimaginable evil and unimaginable good staring us in the face from an unknown crossroads in Lancaster County, PA. As one chapter after another of the massacre of five innocent Amish school girl's unfolded in our homes in living color the initial 3 x 5 pictures of sadness, anger and rage gradually gave way to a 16 x 20 picture capturing the larger graces of the heart-rending images of the Amish forgiving the man who killed their children. They forced us to see how the power of forgiveness enlarges the heart and frees it from the cancerous cells of hate and revenge. They made us wake-up and wonder how the cultural addiction to unforgiveness creates an emotional plaque in the heart cells that are not easily detected as potential fuel for heart attacks, strokes, aneurysms, and sadly, more killings.

This strange and aloof community, living on the fringes of a stressed out, tech-freak, self-absorbed American culture experienced the same kind of brutality that assaulted Columbine High School. The only thing different from last weeks picture is that the Amish couldn't wait to forgive and then reach out and minister to the widow and family of the killer. And millions of people saw them do it on television. It was the most unexpected and unrehearsed marketing of good over evil that I have ever witnessed in the media. It was the source for any homily on the subject of forgiveness and reconciliation. It was humbling. It was awesome. It was the stuff of personal conversion that made us look bad, but made God look good.

Last Monday Charles Roberts IV meant to do evil in that rural one-room schoolhouse. By Tuesday it was clear that God meant it for good. The demons of anger and revenge were silenced by the life-giving voices of forgiveness and peace. They were both soft and loud enough to be life changing for anyone who listened with a desire to have a change of heart. Some people asked me how could they do that? I asked where did that come from and what must I do to free my heart of grudges and groans in order to practice that kind of genuine gospel living? What I witnessed last week was an entire religious community getting out of the way and letting God be noticed and glorified.

In one respect that is the hidden message in today's gospel. The teaching on the permanent and indissoluble character of Christian marriage is as inspirational to some as it is painful for others. There are those in this assembly who have lived this ideal with generosity and selflessness. My own parents, an interfaith couple, do that for 63 years until the death of my dad two years ago. But, there are others in the assembly who have

endured great suffering because that ideal could not be lived. Yet, there must always be room in our assemblies for honoring Hilary Belloc's definition of the Catholic Church: "here comes everybody."

The Church continues to proclaim this teaching on marriage because it has no choice. Just like we have no choice but to proclaim non-violence even though our God revealed in Jesus Christ was the victim of a violent death. And we have no choice but to speak out against all threats to human life because we are only the creatures and not the creator. The teaching on marriage not only comes from Christ but its wisdom lends itself to building up the human family, the church and society. On the other hand, the church suffers with those who have found it impossible to live this commitment. Human weakness is the Creator's way of reminding us that we all fall short some time or other.

In today's gospel it is the Pharisee's who fall short. The question about divorce is intended to trap Jesus. Their motives are sinister. Jesus' answer is intended to enlarge their hearts. By quoting from the Book of Genesis he wants to teach them that marriage is of God and we are not meant to interfere in God's business. But, the real and terrible truth is that we humans are programmed to interfere. We have DNA that sometimes kicks in when some close relationships get rocky or nasty. We take sides. We alienate. We scold. We control. We interfere. What we should be doing with those people is exactly what Jesus is challenging the Pharisees to do. Stay out of God's way and instead help couples believe that the three of them can work things out.

Let me tell you how I worked through this issue in my own life as a priest. I have been ordained nearly 35 years. Twenty-five years ago I noticed that more than a few couples I married were divorcing after only a few years. I took notice that all my work was in marriage prep with no follow-through after the wedding. In the Fall of 1980 I decided to correct this.

First, I began preaching boldly at weddings about how everyone's relationship with this couple changes after the wedding day. I encouraged people not to congratulate them. Rather say, "I believe in you as a couple made one in the Lord." One's relationship with a couple whose identity has been changed by the sacrament of marriage means the script of interacting with them changes too. So, if the marriage becomes shaky and they turn to you for advice your line will always be, "I still believe in you as a couple made one in the Lord." This keeps a friend free from interfering in God's business and therefore can remind the couple that you have faith in them to make sure God is an active partner in finding a way to honor that part of their marriage vows where they promise to be true in good times and in bad times.

Second, I now make a public promise to send the couple a card every anniversary date with the simple message, "I still believe in you." And I invite all the people at the wedding to do the same. In fact, I turn it into a mantra and have everyone chant it.

In the past 25 years I have married about 50 couples. Forty-five of them are still married. I have baptized some of their children and buried some of their spouses. I now see how my lived faith in them has helped them to have faith in each other. But, I have also stood beside a few couples that chose the path of divorce. One of them was my youngest brother. I did not interfere so that the path from pain to healing was of God and not of me. Taking the position of caring spectator is difficult in a culture intoxicated with taking sides and always bent on winning.

The antidote Jesus offers for that arrogant adult attitude is a child-like spirit. Children are capable of gaining or meriting nothing. Their innocence is so transparent that they take everything as gift.

A number of years ago two authors, Stuart Hample and Eric Marshall, edited a book entitled "*Children's Letters to God.*" They convey how at ease children are when conversing with God. A little girl named Jane asks God, "*Instead of letting people die or having to make new ones, why don't you keep the ones you got?*" A little boy named Larry suggests to God, "*Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other if they had their own rooms. It works with my brother.*" Finally, Mickey privately confides to God, "*If you watch in church on Sunday, I will show you my new shoes.*" I am sure the book was an inspiration for Bill Cosby's show a few years ago, "*Kids say the smartest things.*" Last week a 13-year old Amish girl bravely said to a 32-year old killer, "*Shoot me first.*" All I could think of was, "this is Good Friday on a sad Monday in October.

Those words helped me to believe that children say the smartest things. Like Jesus saying something wise and smart to the Pharisees in today's gospel, stretching their hearts beyond the narrowness of selfish motives, I believe children have something wise and smart to say about the virus of violence being unleashed in their schools today. Since Jesus valued them enough to use them as examples of mentoring unconverted adults, I challenge this parish to do the same. Learn to say to your children, "*we believe in you*" to discuss and write new programs in their school curriculums for tolerance, forgiveness, and non-violence. These are the only antidotes for reversing the out-of-control cycle of violence being witnessed in schools. It must begin here. This sacred place is a school of discipleship and last week the Amish reminded us what our Catholic saint Francis of Assisi so often told his followers, "*Go and preach the gospel and sometimes use words.*" The Amish spoke few words because their practicing forgiveness was a more powerful medium.

**I join my heart with yours, my prayer with yours that this tragedy and the noble way it harnessed our Christian religion for living the gospel so simply yet profoundly, will make a difference in our preaching, our worshipping, our formation, our fellowship, our stewardship, our outreach, and our conversations on cell phones, emails and at the dinner tables of married families, single-parent families, separated families, hurting families.**

**The issue here is healing and since that is God's business too then may we all get out of the way and let God have a part in the healing of nations and families that belongs only to God.**

**As we commit ourselves once again to this gospel imperative, nourished by a sacrament of forgiveness we Catholics esteem as the Eucharist, may you be inspired by the words of the ancient prophet Talmud who simply, but strikingly pointed out to the world, there are but ten strong things in the word:**

- Rock, but iron breaks it.**
- Iron, but fire melts it.**
- Fire, but water quenches it.**
- Water, but the clouds bear it.**
- The Clouds, but the wind scatters them.**
- The wind, but the body withstands it.**
- The body, but fright crushes it.**
- Fright, but wine sleeps it off.**
- Death is the strongest of all.**
- But LOVE saves us from death.**

**Amen.**