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“Unbelievable Forgiveness?”

Text: Mark 9:38-50; Numbers 11; James 4:7-12

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Forgiveness has been in the news a lot the past couple of weeks. Specifically because of the schoolhouse shooting in the Amish community. People are asking about forgiveness. People are wondering. People are curious. Here's how one newspaper story put it:

“Forgiveness.

We all want to think we are capable of it. And for most of us, most of the time, we are. We can forgive a child who disobeys. Or a delivery driver who accidentally knocks over our mailbox. Perhaps even a thief who takes what is ours.

But what about an offense far worse? Unspeakably, unimaginably worse?

What about a stranger who barges into a country schoolhouse, lines up 10 innocent children against the chalkboard – and opens fire?

What parents, what community, could forgive that?

We now know the answer. . . .

Amish neighbors went to the killer's home to console his wife and other relatives. They attended his funeral, and invited his widow to attend at least one of the murdered girls' funerals. As thousands of dollars poured in from around the world to help the families of the victims, the Amish set up a fund for the killer's own children.

Unbelievable.” (John Grogan, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 10/13/06)

I read that and I thought, why is that unbelievable?

Why are not *all* Christians known as a community who would forgive?

And not only forgive, but *gladly do good to those who sin against us*, as the explanation to the Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer puts it?

I don't know about you, but I wouldn't have *even thought* of using some of the donation money to set up a fund for the killer's own children. It would have been the farthest thing from my mind. But why?

Why is forgiveness like this so rare? And so unbelievable that newspapers are writing stories about it? Have we, as Christians, lost our saltiness for the world? The saltiness not of the Law, but of the Gospel? So that forgiveness is so rare, so strange, so unexpected?

Many will, undoubtedly, chalk this kind of forgiveness up as a relic of the past, just like all the other so-called weird, antiquated ways of the Amish.

Which is sad.

Because of all the ways the Amish try not to conform themselves to the ways of the world, they got this one right.

For it is not our clothing, or not using electricity or cars, that should separate us from the world and make us stand out – it is forgiveness. Hard forgiveness. Forgiveness when no one else will forgive, forgiveness.

So that people will ask, and wonder, and be curious about such forgiveness.

And where it comes from.

Forgiveness, not because we have to, not grudgingly given, but because we can't help it. Forgiveness, not in order to get anything from God, but because we've already been given everything by God.

Forgiveness not for me, but solely to do good to the one who sinned against me.

So what body part do you cut off for failure to forgive?

Not your hand, or foot, or eye. This one will cost us our hearts; our lives.

And if my failure to forgive has caused others to sin like me . . . the millstone around my neck is large indeed. Very large.

Turns out I am more like the gunman than I am the Amish.

The one *needing* forgiveness rather than giving it.

The good news is that the forgiveness I need has been given to me! And to you! By the very one the bullets of our sin had killed.

The Son of God, made man. Jesus Christ.

He is the One who stood before the firing squad, to take the wages of sin in our place.

To die Himself, so that we might live.

To do good for those who sinned against Him.

Not because He had to, but because He couldn't help it.

Not to get anything from God, because He was God.

And not to gain anything for Himself, but solely to do good for me.

And so this “unbelievable forgiveness?” It's what we hear of, and see, and receive *here*, every week!

It is what Christianity is all about.

That we who deserve nothing, have been given everything.

That we gunmen of sin have been forgiven and given not a trust fund, but a heavenly kingdom! And the promise of eternal life, with the One who paid for our sins and rose to life again!

Yes, He *wants* us to live with Him forever! To welcome us into *His* community – of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Of the angels and archangels and all the company of Heaven.

And so rather than cut out my heart and end my life, Jesus' heart and life were given for me.

Rather than cut off my hands and feet, and gouge out my eyes, Jesus offered all His body in my place.

And rather than drown me in the depths of the sea because of my sin, my Saviour instead drown me in the depths of the font, to kill that old man, and raise a new man to life again! That His death and resurrection be my death and resurrection.

His life, my life.

And His forgiveness, my forgiveness.

And yours.

Is that unbelievable? Well, yes! Which is why we confess in the Small Catechism that *"I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel . . ."* (Explanation to the Third Article)

And so we have been given the faith to believe.

We have been salted by the Holy Spirit, and His forgiveness.

The Holy Spirit and His forgiveness poured out upon us in the font.

In fact, that is why salt sometimes used to be used at baptisms, even by Luther himself.

To help us understanding the *preserving* work of the Spirit, who not only starts us on the road as Christians, but keeps us there.

For holiness is His work.

And so not only at the font, but also from the pulpit and at the altar, in the Word and in the Supper, we are given the Spirit, and His forgiveness. We are salted again, and preserved from the devastation of sin. Made holy by the Holy Spirit, who lives in us.

In the Old Testament reading, Moses wished that the Lord would put His Spirit on all His people. (Numbers 11:29) And ever since Pentecost, we know that He has! He has given His Spirit to you. To salt you. To preserve you unto everlasting life.

And to be salt for the world.

Not to judge or speak evil (James 4), but to salt the world with the forgiveness and love of Christ.

The hard forgiveness.

The forgiveness when no one else will forgive, forgiveness.

The do good to those who sin against you forgiveness.

So that people will ask, and wonder, and be curious about such forgiveness.

And where it comes from.

For we know!

The newspaper article I read from earlier ended this way: *"The Amish have found the road to a higher place."* Well, you see, no, they haven't.

And this is what the world can't figure out.

The Amish haven't found the way to the higher place – the higher place has found its way down to us! In the person of Jesus Christ.

And He is here, even now, for us.

For the answer to the millstones around our necks is not to make us better swimmers!

It is to have that millstone removed.

And when the stone was rolled away from Jesus' tomb, it was!

Our millstones were cast into the depths of the sea, but the only thing that went with them were our sins!

And you, and me, were set free.

Free, to live.

Free, to forgive.

Free, to do good to those who sin against us.

That this rare forgiveness be not so rare.

That this unbelievable forgiveness, be proclaimed.

That all may know, and believe.

That it be not just an Amish thing, but a Christian thing.

A Christ thing.

As Christ lives in us.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.