

October 2nd, 2006 was a typical fall day. It was normally quiet and peaceful in the rolling Amish farmlands of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, but that peace was suddenly shattered when the sound of gunfire was heard from inside an Amish school.

Charlie Roberts was a milk truck driver who serviced the local community, including the farms of some of the victims 'families. Nine years earlier his wife Amy gave birth to their first child, a baby girl. However, the baby died after living only 20 minutes.

Apparently, Roberts 'daughter's death affected him greatly. He never forgave God for her death and planned to get revenge one day.

On the morning of October 2nd, Roberts said goodbye to his two children at the school bus stop. He then drove to the West Nickel Mines Amish School.

When he walked in the door, some of the children recognized him. On that particular day, the school had four adult visitors: the teacher's mother, her sister, and two sisters-in-law.

When the young teacher saw that Robert was carrying guns, she and her mother left the other adults with the children and ran to a nearby house for help. A call was made to 911.

Next, Roberts told the boys to leave. They complied, huddling near an outhouse to pray.

Roberts ordered the ten girls to lie down, facing the blackboard; he tied their hands and feet. Then Roberts told the girls he was sorry for what he was about to do. At the same time, though, he said:

“I’m angry at God and I need to punish some Christian girls to get even with him.”

When the local police broke into the one-room Amish schoolhouse, they found ten Amish girls ages six to thirteen who had been shot by Charles Carl Roberts IV. The murderer had then committed suicide. Five of the girls died and five survived.

There was then, as there was this past week at what happened, widespread shock. But in this, there was also hope and mercy.

Despite their grief over this shocking loss, the Amish community refused to cast blame. They didn't point fingers; they didn't hold a press conference with attorneys at their sides.

Instead, they reached out with grace and compassion to the killer's family.

On the afternoon of the shooting, an Amish grandfather of one of the murdered girls expressed forgiveness toward the killer. That same day, Amish neighbors visited the Roberts 'family to comfort them in their sorrow and pain.

Later that week, the Roberts family were invited to the funeral of one of the Amish girls who had been killed. Amazingly, Amish mourners outnumbered the non-Amish at Charles Roberts 'funeral.

After he cold-bloodedly shot 10 innocent Amish schoolgirls, the Amish almost immediately forgave him and showed compassion toward his family.

This greatly impacted Teri Roberts, who was the mother of the shooter. Out of the horror of this came that moment where Roberts met not emptiness or rage but compassion.

Teri was told about what happened from her husband, and went to her son's house. She was devastated as anyone would be. Her initial reaction was she had to move away; but the Amish came to her home the night of the shooting saying they wanted her to stay. In her words, "there are no words to describe how that made us feel that day; for the mother and father who lost 2 daughters at the hand of our son to come up and be the first to grieve with us; wow; is there anything in this life we should not forgive?"

Every Thursday for years that followed, she would care for the wounded survivor. And when asked if she had a message for the Newtown families, her response was that one should ask God to provide new things to focus on, not taking the place of what is lost, but moving forward and finding something to give us a hope and a future." A future made possible by forgiveness.

Among those embracing that idea was Jonas Beiler, who did extensive mental therapy with the Amish Community in Pennsylvania. He and his therapists counseled many in the Amish community following the school shooting, and help them deal with it one day at a time. In his own life too, he suffered tragedy. Thirty years ago their infant daughter was killed. And the Beilers, like many people in the Amish community at that time, kept their grief hidden, even from each other. But only when they started attending counseling several years later was their marriage saved.

Beiler became such a believer in therapy that he set out to be a marriage and family counselor himself. To make ends meet, Anne started an Amish food stand at the farmer's market. The hand-rolled, soft pretzels she made were very popular, and became a nationwide business, Auntie Anne's Pretzels that you've probably seen in stores or at the airport. The business success allowed Beiler to help popularize counseling among the Amish.

In his words: "Tragedy changes you. You can't stay the same. Where that lands you don't always know. But what I found out in my own experience if you bring what little pieces you have left to God, he somehow helps you make good out of it. And I see that happening in this school shooting as

well. One just simple thing that the whole world got to see was this simple message of forgiveness.”

Sadly, tragedy is all around us; this past week our nation endured another school shooting, and we all aware of hate and anger and violent crime.

Sometimes it seems like an endless cycle. Many of us suffer individual tragedies as well; we all lose people we care about, and face the pain of people betraying us or hurting us or people we love. Life is indeed hard.

But as Christians, we also must strive to move forward. And the way this happens is by remembering Christ is with us, and as we journey with Him, we look towards Him, we look inwardly, and we also look ahead.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, we are reminded how the Lord has entered into the heavenly sanctuary by His own sacrifice and this gives us hope that we can enter in as well. “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful,” we are told. Paul reminds his followers in his letter to the Ephesians that he wants them to come to a fuller knowledge of Christ’s power, a power which is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.” The Christian community at Ephesus could often feel powerless like we do in the face of

so much evil, but Paul reminds them that God is in control, and the power of Jesus will triumph. For Jesus as we are told in the Gospel would suffer, and He died and arose; we are witnesses of these things. No matter what, God is with us.

However, sometimes that can be hard to see can't it? Sometimes life can be quite hard and the storm clouds so intense. For Jonas Beiler, he felt the need to bury his pain, and this was common amongst the Amish as he points out. Sometimes can't we do that too? But if we are to be a people of hope - a people who are sent - we first have to be able to equip ourselves to be able to radiate God's love. And sometimes when that can be hard, it takes a bit of work. It means making peace with our past, or going to confession. It might mean finding someone to talk to, a true friend who we can open up to journey with us, or looking into the past at our wounds and talking to a therapist or counselor so we can be truly healed. It's important to be honest with ourselves if we are covering up wounds, or maybe struggling with anger, sadness, anxiety, or relying too much on alcohol when these could indicate a problem; the same is true with our loved ones. There's having a bad day, and then there's things that happen in our minds we need to be aware of and get help for a loved one and remind them, and

ourselves, that these are things we don't cover up. For hope to shine through us, we need to see it first, and at times it takes others to help facilitate that.

Lastly, we are sent. As Teri Roberts puts it, we do not forget the past, but we strive to find hope for the future and something new to put our energy into to be an agent of change. We are not like the men of Galilee standing and looking into heaven. Rather, our hope puts us on the journey to heaven by bringing hope into this world. We see that through tragedy when people help one another. So how do we be that person of hope and compassion? Through forgiveness. Through listening to people and spending time with them. through volunteering to help the needy and less fortunate. Through turning the other cheek. Through evangelizing the world even when there is a hostile reaction to our message. Through acts of love and mercy. This is how the risen and ascended Christ lives through you and me.

Unfortunately no law you can pass will eliminate evil. The deadliest school attack was actually in 1927, when Andrew Kehoe set up a series of explosives at a school he was angry he had to pay taxes to, after he took the life of his wife. But then as today, we saw the inherent goodness in

humanity shine forth. One fifth grader at the time wrote a letter to the families of Bath: "One 5th grade class wrote: "Even if we are small, we understand all the sorrow and misfortune that has struck our dear brothers." And another Italian class wrote: "We are praying to God to give to the unfortunate mothers and fathers, the strength to bear the great sorrow that has descent on them, we are near to you in spirit." Aid poured in from all over, and over 100,000 vehicles descended on Bath to help - a huge number considering this was 1927. This is because while some choose evil, many more choose good, for inside all of us is this capacity to do such good, and to bring hope and mercy into this world. Like the apostles, we are sent. Like them, we do not journey alone. And so, as we approach the table of the Lord, may we accept the challenge to become what we have eaten. Our amen says yes to being Christ to one another. At this table Jesus 'ascension allows him to live with us all the days of our lives.