

I Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-17 (NIV)

¹⁰ By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

¹⁶ Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.

Matthew 5:43-48 (NRSV, *adapted*)

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your heavenly Creator; for the sun will rise on the evil and on the good, and the rain will fall on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your siblings, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Creator is perfect.

"Holy and Precious"

Please pray with me: "Renew us with your Spirit; Lord, free us, make us one!" That is our prayer this day, O God, as you continue to challenge us to love all persons, and even to pray for those who persecute us. As Fred Kaan prayed in the hymn we just sang, "Let your acceptance change us, so that we may be moved in living situations to do the truth in love." Give us the courage and strength to try, try, and try again, to live the life of love to which you call us. Amen.

Thirteen years ago, folk singer John McCutcheon wrote a song which he titled, "Forgive Us." It is not difficult for us to guess that it was based on the Lord's Prayer, specifically on the familiar phrase, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." He begins this song telling about his experiences growing up in a rural community where he attended St. James church, saying the Lord's Prayer each week. Then, he comes to the bridge of the song when he sings about an event that you may remember being reported from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. This

was not a human interest story about some of the Amish inhabitants of that region. Rather, it was the horror story about a massacre that took place on October 2, 2006 at the Amish schoolhouse in the village of Nickel Mines. To summarize, on that day, a young man who was angry with God entered the schoolhouse, terrorized the teacher and her students, and then told the teacher and the boys to run away. He proceeded to tie up the ten young girls, ages six to thirteen, shoot them, and then kill himself. Five of the girls survived, and five did not.

Upon hearing about this, I remember being stricken with grief and anger myself, at what this man had done to families and a community who work so hard to live according to their beliefs, and to live peacefully among folks like us who are so different from them, and sometimes are unkind to them. I remember trying to imagine the range of emotions which the parents of these children must have been experiencing, as their children were so traumatized!

Amid the media frenzy, we heard developments of the ongoing investigation about why the man had taken these girls' lives and how the tragedy had affected this tight-knit community. BUT THEN, within hours, the media also reported, and the song conveys, the next shocking, God-inspired turn of events. The Amish families, including the children's parents and the Elders of the community, announced publicly that they forgave the man who caused them such pain, and that they had set up a scholarship fund for the gunman's children. The next day, they took food to the gunman's family. And six days after the shooting, families who had just buried their daughters attended the gunman's funeral. The song continues, "Forgive us, as we forgive. Forgive us, as we forgive." Listen . . .

Play "Forgive Us" by John McCutcheon

And Jesus says to us, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your heavenly Creator; for the sun will rise on the evil and on the good, and the rain will fall on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? And if you greet only your siblings, what more are you doing than others?"

Let that sink into your heart for a moment! Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. It seems unthinkable! It is not the

natural course of action for humans. The wonderful thing is that Jesus is NOT telling us to do something that he did not do himself. For even on the cross, he prayed for those who misunderstood God's purposes, and were executing him. Yes, Jesus loved the human family, the whole human family, until the very end . . . which thankfully for us, was a new beginning!

Contemplate this question with me: "Have I ever experienced the effect of actually praying for whoever has hurt me, to wish them well, to seek their healing and peace?" I have found the proverb about prayer to be true over and over again. When I pray for those who have persecuted me, it not only is a prayer to change THEM, but it also brings the blessing of changing ME ~ changing hatred into acceptance, changing fear into courage, changing resentment into peace.

And the opposite is true too: What is it like to be caught in the prison of unforgiveness? To carry the weight of a grudge for years? To allow resentment to cast a negative shadow on one's outlook on all of life?

Loving one's "enemies," and praying for those who "persecute" us is not easy. As the Amish families stated in an article by Joanna Walters, printed in *The Guardian* ten years following that dreadful event in the Amish Schoolhouse, "Despite the Amish's legendary powers of forgiveness, the struggle was constant. One father stated, 'You have to fight the bitter thoughts every day.'" But forgiving the gunman, for this Amish community, was their collective effort to give up the right to revenge and grudges. The Amish believe that harboring anger and resentment is corrosive. And, just as carrying anger and resentment can slowly eat away at one's being, forgiveness, as a process of letting go of the pain, can slowly heal unimaginable wounds.

"Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you," Jesus said. By doing so, we are showing the world that we are children of God. As we love all people, including our friends, family, **and** enemies, we are living into that perfection for which we have been created. For God created us to be holy and precious. May it be so! Amen.