

Why?

That question raced through my mind as I heard the first, horrifying reports about the shooting of Amish school girls in Pennsylvania. I had grown up less than 30 minutes away from the little town of Nickel Mines, PA. My grandparents spoke Pennsylvania Dutch as children. We knew Amish families. We treasured their peaceful witness in a troubled world.

So...why would anyone break into a school building, send away the adults, bar the doors...and then start shooting? Why would such an unspeakable horror happen to such innocent children? Why would our violent, modern world intrude on a community which sought a life apart? Why would loving parents have to face the burials of small children? Why would a loving God allow such things to happen? Why death? Why violence? Why murder?

Why?

My parishioners regularly come to me with that question. While the circumstances change, the primordial cry of the heart remains sadly the same. When a husband loses his wife to breast cancer, he cries out, "Why?" When a young man is gunned down on a street corner, his mother sobs, "Why?" When a wedding party is blown apart in Iraq or Afghanistan by a teenager who has strapped bombs to his abdomen, we shake our heads and ask, "Why?" War. Illness. Injustice. Heartbreak. They all draw the same question from deep within. "Why?"

Since Catholics like to go to confession, allow me to confess what I say whenever a parishioner asks that question. When they ask, "Why," I simply tell them, "I don't know." Philosophers and theologians with advanced degrees have struggled for centuries to give us an "answer" to the vexing question of violence and suffering in the midst of a world created by a loving God. While we must honor the human instinct which leads us to try to understand "why," we must also honor human beings enough to be honest with them and to say, "I don't know why."

There are, of course, priests, preachers, and spiritual gurus who are willing to step forward and offer answers to the questions we ask in the face of senseless suffering. They tell about God's justice, about God's ways (which are not our ways), about God's universe which we cannot comprehend fully. They tell us to trust that God is working out His purpose. They are willing to tell us "why."

But I say...beware of priests, preachers, and spiritual gurus who offer overly-facile answers to life's most persistent questions. Beware of them, because the answers they offer are usually so laden with saccharine that they fail to take seriously the pain which prompts the question in the first place. Beware of them, because the God they end up describing is either incredibly unjust, incredibly fickle, or incredibly mean. In my experience, the God they end up describing has very little to do with the God of Jesus Christ. The God they end up describing would not be a god I would want to follow.

So...we live with the questions. We honor the questions, and the questioners. We take seriously the basic human instinct which tries to find reasons and explanations in the midst of the unthinkable or the unbearable. We choose, as people of faith, to live with the questions – to live *in* the questions – because we have come to learn that God is more often found in our honest *asking* rather than our placid *answering*.

When five Amish girls are shot to death in their school room, and five others are injured, we wonder why. I confess that I don't know why. But there is another question with which we may wrestle, and this question will yield some enlightenment. We move from "Why?" to "How?" We may never know why they died, but we can ask how they lived.

Let me be clear: I did not know any of these young girls, or their families. I have no first hand knowledge of their particular circumstances. But, as someone who grew up on the edge of the Pennsylvania Dutch Country, I can offer a few observations about how these young girls lived, because I know a bit about how their whole community lives. How did these young girls live? They lived in a community which makes conscious decisions to honor family and faith above the tyranny of technology. They lived in a community where hard work is valued more highly than the acquisition of all that is new, all that is shiny, all that is 'the latest.' Although their community chooses to live simply, they are no fools. They face ever-increasing pressures to assimilate into a culture which views them as odd hold-outs in the vast advance of modern life. How did these girls live? They lived in a community which reinforced the most basic relationships which build a truly human life: family, church, prayer, neighbors, stewardship of God's creation.

How did they live? They chose to be different in a world which sees fewer and fewer examples of people who are willing to live their faith so fully that they actually stand out in the crowd. And I do not idealize their lives. The Amish face many of the same pressures that the rest of us have come to know. The economic realities of our nation make it harder and harder for them to live as they choose. There is drug abuse among their youth. There are examples of domestic violence and abuse. Their lives are not lived in Eden. But their lives reveal that we can choose to be different if we allow our faith to guide us.

How did those young girls live? Only their families and friends can tell us the ultimate truth about these little ones. But we are able to say, very simply, that their faith made them different. And even as I write these words, that thought causes me to tremble. Because, I am forced to ask another question: When I die, will people have evidence – and evidence at all – that my faith made me different? Did my faith cause me to make choices that were obviously different than my neighbor's?

Why did they die? I don't know. How did they live? We have at least a glimpse. Still, one more question arises. We can talk about how they *lived* – but how do these Amish girls *live, right now?*

As Christians, these Amish girls believed in the resurrection of Christ. They loved the Lord, and had confidence that what God accomplished in an empty tomb was the definitive undoing of death. They loved Christ. And they believed that Christ loved them. If that is so, then Christ has absolutely no intention of spending an eternity without them. How do they live, right now? As a Christian, the only answer I can know is this: they live, right now, in the heart of the God who made them.

How do they live, right now? They also live on in the community which nurtured them, a community which has tried to teach the rest of us a thing or two about forgiveness in the face of violence. Although the Amish tend to shun the camera, one or two of their leaders allowed a brief question from the swarming reporters. It was almost embarrassing to watch highly educated reporters fumble for words as they talked to the members of the Amish community. One reporter asked a neighbor of the little girls, "What will your community do now?" The man replied, "We will forgive the man who did this." The reporter was stunned. She paused, then blurted out, "But how can you do that?" And the Amish man looked at her, with a mix of wonderment and compassion, and replied, "We can do it because God makes it possible."

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How do these little girls still live? They live on in a community of believers who have staked their whole way of life on a Gospel that many of us simply honor with lip service. These little girls live on in a community which has tried, in the gentlest way, to remind our nation that forgiveness is possible, even in the midst of unspeakable violence, because God makes it possible. They live on in the daily witness of family and friends who choose to live a more simple life in a complex world. They live on in family and friends who understand that forgiveness is not an option – it is a command of God. And they can do it because God makes it possible.

If I want to honor the lives of these little girls from Pennsylvania, I probably will not do so by preaching sermons filled with answers, or writing treatises filled with truths. I will honor their lives by turning questions about *them* into questions about *me*. I will honor their lives by allowing the example of *their* community to inspire an honest examination of *my* community. I cannot know why they died – but I can ask anew why I live. I can know a little bit about how they lived – I can think a lot more about how I live. I can reflect on how they live, right now, in the ongoing witness of their community – a community which lives, loves, prays, and forgives, because God makes it possible. Does my community live, love, pray and forgive with the same confidence in God's presence and power? And, if I am convinced that the resurrection of Christ is a gift offered to all, is there anything about my life and work which brings the power of hope, healing, and life to others?

For now, I will try to avoid answers. I think God wants me to dwell with Him in the questions.