

the organizational and spiritual well-being of the community. What kind of community have we committed or recommitted to?

Our commitment statements tell us that we have committed to fostering justice and being in solidarity with the poor, to being a steward of the whole of creation, beginning with the natural environment, to working for the end of all war, both public and private, and to responding joyfully with my life, as the grace of God gives me freedom. From this I deduce that we are a community seeking justice and especially economic justice, that we care about the environment, that we are a community seeking peace in all our relationships, and that we are marked by joy, freedom, and God's grace.

And as the TV ads say, "But wait, there's more."

The "Call of Seekers Church" tells us that we have committed or recommitted to be a member of a community that worships the Biblical faith through shared leadership, and implements Christian servanthood in the structures in which we live our daily lives, that we are marked by empowering others through from bondage to freedom. We see Christ as our true life source, being in Christ through koinonia with each other and in genuine self-giving to the world. We humbly describe ourselves not as persons "who have arrived, but persons who are intentionally on the way.

In his letter to the Christian community at Corinth Saint Paul wrote that we have committed to being a member of the body of Christ and each of us brings a spiritual gift to make that body work well. And in that body, there is no one member who

is unimportant and there is no one member who is more important than another. "If the foot says, 'Because I'm not a hand, I don't belong to the body,' it still belongs to the body, and if the ear says, 'Because I'm not an eye, I don't belong to the body. If the body were all an eye, how could it hear? If the body were all an ear, how could it smell?.. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you'; and the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you.'" St. Paul is describing the ideal Body of Christ.

But the truth is, Seekers Church is an imperfect local part of the Body of Christ. It's imperfect because I'm in it. Because sometimes I do think, "He/she doesn't – as Jacqie Wallen said so eloquently a few Sundays ago – show up regularly. When he/she does show up, he/she drives me crazy. He/she doesn't bring us any spiritual gift for the community. We'd be better off if ____ (fill in the blank) just left us and worshipped somewhere else." In doing this I unconsciously, or even possibly consciously, am trying to amputate the Body of Christ. And I am too full of self righteousness to admit that I have sinned grievously in wishing for us to undergo an amputation. And I am too full of pride to acknowledge that I need that person's forgiveness and your forgiveness.

The theme that Celebration Circle chose for this season is "Loving Forgiveness." Even after reading the introductory paragraph written in the folder for our worship I thought that loving forgiveness in a Christian community is a tautology. How can a Christian love without forgiving? How can a Christian forgive without loving?

I wondered what Celebration Circle was thinking. In an effort to try to understand why they chose this theme I began looking

to see if forgiveness is prominent in Seekers. I began with worship, since they plan it and it is the center of our congregational life. It is in our printed responsive reading and the liturgists have incorporated it into their invocations. I noticed that while we have been using this theme our printed community prayers have not asked for forgiveness. They're not part of the printed confession, and the statement of assurance that the liturgist reads doesn't say anything about forgiveness – it just describes some loving attributes of God. And the community prayer – which used to be the Lord's Prayer so we would say "and forgive us our debts or trespasses as we forgive our debtors or those who trespass against us," – is now a prayer that doesn't say anything about forgiveness at all.

Then I noticed that neither the member's commitment nor the Stewards' commitment that we said a few minutes ago says anything at all about forgiveness.

I was musing on all this and then I got around to looking at myself and my behavior. As September 11th loomed, I wrestled with my own unwillingness to forgive those who attacked the World Trade Center buildings, those who hijacked the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania, and especially those who attacked the Pentagon. On the 10th of September I helped check in the victims' families who were coming to attend the dedication of the Pentagon Memorial. I saw a few I remembered from the assistance center we had set up for the victim's families in the immediate aftermath of the attack. But there I was sitting next to a poster with the faces of all of them –nearly 200 faces of men and women, girls and boys, faces of the youngest child on the plane to the oldest passenger, faces of several people I knew in the Pentagon. I could feel my anger rise and my tears, my anger and tears not just for these

family members and victims of the attack but for all the victims I have encountered in my work and the victims I haven't encountered – anger and tears for victims of domestic violence and especially for the children who are victims of physical abuse and neglect, of emotional abuse, and of unspeakable sexual abuse. Maybe my anger and tears are directed at God for a world with so much sorrow and pain, for so much suffering. So I was not ready to attend the silent service here on the 11th for remembrance, repentance, and reconciliation. I was ready to remember these victims, but if repentance meant forgiveness, I was not ready to forgive. I am not certain when I will be ready, but I know that I am not yet ready.

That Sunday, September 14, Peter Bankson gave me a gift in the form of his sermon. In it he described his own struggles to resolve the tension between his deep desire for reconciliation that he felt at that that silent service, and then passing Arlington National Cemetery, a reminder of the great civil war – a war whose outcome some people within my lifetime were still not reconciled to – and of the many who gave their lives to defend the freedom of this nation, and then the memorial to those who experienced terror and death in the Pentagon. Peter went on to say that generosity is at the heart of forgiveness, that faithfulness –commitment – can be a laboratory for loving forgiveness because forgiveness is rooted in relationship, and that surrender to Christ's loving forgiveness can be a path to transformation.

And then, the issue of loving forgiveness came up everywhere if I looked for it. In last week's lectionary the Hebrew people were in the Sinai desert, one of the harshest environments on the planet. They had escaped from slavery, but in comparison to their hunger and starvation and fear of

the unknown, oppression from the Egyptians was looking good. The one person they trusted, Moshe, was up on the mountain, communing with this God that had no name and no incarnation. He was gone so long that they lost faith that he would return, and asked Aaron to craft them gods to protect them. When God saw what had happened he swore to annihilate them, but Moses pleaded for them and talked God out of it.

In the part that was left out between last week and this week, Moses was so angry when he saw the golden bull-calf and the people dancing that he threw down the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments, breaking them, burnt the idol and ground it into powder, then sprinkled it on water and made the people drink it. Then he asked, "Who is on the Lord's side? Come to me." The Levites, the tribe descended from Levi, rallied to him and he commanded each of them to arm himself and to kill his brother, his friend, and his neighbor. They did and about three thousand died. Then Moses pleaded again with God to forgive them. God replied that his angel would go before them but that he would punish them for their sin, and he sent a plague. God would take them to the Promised Land but would not travel with them for fear that he would annihilate them. So much for forgiveness!

Nevertheless, God kept a relationship with Moses. God relented and agreed to go with the people on their journey and promised to reveal his glory to Moses, as we read in this week's lectionary. As Everett Fox says in his Schocken Bible: The Five Books of Moses,

All that is ventured here is a statement of God's essence, or more precisely, of his essence for human beings: merciful but just. ...[I]t is almost as if the text is saying: "This is all that can be known, intimately, of this God, and this

is all one needs to know..." There is no shape, no natural manifestation: only words, which describe God's relationship to human beings.

About two years ago, on the morning of October 10, 2006, Charles Carl Roberts IV invaded a small Amish school in Lancaster County. He sent the boys outside, tied 10 girls up on the floor and shot them, killing five, and then committing suicide. That evening many Amish went to his home and told his widow that they were sorry he had died, that they had forgiven him and that she needn't move away. At his funeral half of the mourners were Amish, and from the funds donated from people all around the world to the families of the victim the Amish trustees donated funds to her for their family.

I remember being stunned by the quick forgiveness by the Amish community and as a person who has been part of the field that aids victims of crime for over 30 years I was troubled by it. I could remember a workshop on faith and recovery at a national conference of the National Organization for Victim Assistance where survivors of assaults and rapes and family members of homicide victims anguished over their inability to forgive the criminals who had harmed or killed their loved ones years after the crime. I remember their anguish at being told by their clergy and their fellow worshippers that they had to put their grief behind them, that Jesus commanded them to forgive. And I remembered their relief when clergy from several faiths shared their grief in the workshop and told them that the time to let go or to forgive was in God's hands and would be in God's time.

So during the silent retreat last month, I read *Amish Grace: How forgiveness Transcended Tragedy*, by Donald Kraybill (Ron's brother), Steven Nolt and David Weaver-Zercher. It was a big

help to me and I am grateful to Deborah for bringing it to the retreat when we are not supposed to read too much! Instead of forgiveness being seen as an ethical problem to be resolved intellectually, the Amish see forgiveness as part of their common commitment to follow the way of Jesus. That commitment includes the conscious yielding of self to God and the community through daily practice of making oneself vulnerable, trusting others, and being interdependent with others committed to the same values. They know that the secular local, state, and federal governments can and do take action against those who break the law, and the transgressor may have to suffer the legal consequences. Caesar gets what is Caesar's. But at a personal level and at a community level they forgive. God gets what is God's.

The practice of forgiveness is critical to Amish theology. They pray the Lord's Prayer, with its plea for God's forgiveness as they forgive others, at least twice daily at home, and during every worship service. They believe God fully expects them to practice forgiveness, and it is reflected in their hymns, the stories they tell about their martyrs, in their lectionary readings, in communion, and in their foot-washing.

How can they do this? It is not that they don't grieve for loss or for those in their community who are victims of crimes. It isn't that they necessarily want to forgive. Instead, they believe that God's will is bigger than their understanding – than all of our understanding. They believe in the Last Judgment, and that God's judgment on others and on us may not be the ones we would give. They take seriously the passage in Matthew's Gospel that immediately follows the Lord's Prayer – that if we do not forgive others, God will not forgive us for our sins. And they practice what psychologist,

Everett L. Worthington, Jr. calls “decisional forgiveness.”

I have not read Worthington’s book *Forgiving and Reconciling: Bridges to Wholeness and Hope* but Kraybill and his co-authors quoted Worthington as distinguishing between decisional forgiveness and emotional forgiveness:

Decisional forgiveness is a personal commitment to control negative behavior, even if negative emotions continue. Decisional forgiveness promises not to act in revenge or avoidance, but it doesn’t necessarily make a person feel less unforgiving. Emotional forgiveness, on the other hand, happens when negative emotions – resentment, hostility, and even hatred – are replaced by positive feelings. Thus, forgiveness is both a short-term act and a long-term process, but the two are connected. The initial decision to forgive may spark eh emotional change. A decision to forgive does not mean a victim has erased bitter emotions, but it does mean that emotional transformation is more likely to follow.

As I have wrestled with this theme of loving forgiveness, some hard truths emerged: sometimes I act unlovingly to one or more among you and I frequently act unlovingly to people outside this community. Sometimes I have not forgiven one or more of you when I should have and I frequently do not forgive people outside this community when I should. I am better at acting unlovingly than I am at acting lovingly. I am better at holding a grudge than I am at forgiving. I confess that it is a relief to me that our Seekers Commitment statement says nothing about forgiveness, because that is one commitment I would fail it too frequently.

But maybe we should add it...

For those of you who made one of the commitments today – without the addition of practicing loving forgiveness – but weren't sure you could live up to some parts of that commitment, you are in good company. We all have failed to live up to what God wants for us and requires for us. And not just Seekers: all have fallen short of the glory of God. The good news is that while we were yet sinners Christ came to us and for us. And by his death and resurrection we are forgiven. And it is out of gratitude for being forgiven that we can claim our belonging to the Body of Christ: a place where we can learn to forgive lovingly, a place where we can receive loving forgiveness for our failure to forgive and for our failure to love. Let us commit to lovingly forgive each other.