

Lessons from Shenandoah: “Step Across” – Part I (Forgiveness)

Message for North East United Methodist Church

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Often when my boys and I backpack in the Shenandoah Mountains we come across streams or chasms which we have to traverse. Once in a while we have to travel up the stream one or two hundred yards to find a place that is suitable to cross, that isn't too deep. Sometimes, when we are hiking we come across crevices in the rock. We can look down into small caves that could be the home of all sorts of creatures. Often my boys have fun jumping across many of these chasms.



As I was thinking about the streams we find ways across and the deep cuts in the rock we “STEP ACROSS,” I began thinking about the many chasms that exist between us and others, and how hard it is at times to “STEP ACROSS”

Two chasms that exist that Christ calls us to “STEP ACROSS” are (1) Relationships that have been broken; and (2) Relationships with those who are different.

There are so many examples throughout history of how the power of God helped someone “STEP ACROSS” these chasms...and find themselves in right relationship with another...and through that relationship experience God...

First, We Must “STEP ACROSS” The Chasm Of Broken Relationships.

One of the greatest examples of this happened October 2, 2006 at the West Nickel Mines School in Lancaster County, PA...I am sure many of you, being so close to where it happened, remember and were affected by the tragedy that occurred that day.



On that day, gunman Charles Carl Roberts walked into the one-room school house, shooting ten girls between the ages of 6 and 13 years old; five of the girls died. Roberts then shot himself.

The response of the Amish community, of the parents of the victims, was as important a story as the shooting itself. On the day of the shooting, a grandfather of one of the murdered Amish girls was heard warning some young relatives not to hate the killer, saying, "*We must not think evil of this man.*" An Amish neighbor comforted the Roberts family hours after the shooting and extended forgiveness to them. Amish community members visited and comforted Roberts' widow, parents, and parents-in-law. One Amish man held Roberts' sobbing father in his arms, reportedly for as long as an hour, to comfort him. The Amish set up a charitable fund for the family of the shooter. About 30 members of the Amish community attended Roberts' funeral, and Marie Roberts, the widow of the killer, was one of the few outsiders invited to the funeral of one of the victims.

Some commentators criticized the swift and complete forgiveness with which the Amish responded, arguing that forgiveness is inappropriate when no remorse has been expressed.

"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing..."

Enos Miller, grandfather of two girls, Mary Liz (8) and Lena (7), who were both killed by the gunman, was asked by a reporter if he had forgiven the gunman. Miller replied, "*In my heart, yes,*" he said, explaining it was '*through God's help.*'"

"...but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

It is only by looking to the cross...



...remembering the example Jesus set for each of us...

"Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do"...

...It is only through the power of God, the Holy Spirit, that one can "STEP ACROSS" such a chasm as the Amish did in 2006.

We pray that most will not have to face a chasm the size of the one the Amish faced that October, but there will be times along this life journey when we will have to deal with chasms, crevices, and cracks developing between us and others...sometimes because of the other person's

actions...sometimes because of our own...sometimes because both of us generated the break in the rock of our relationship...

Kerry and Chris Shook, in their book, One Month To Live, talk about three mountains that exist...



...that get in our way, that often create chasms that cause us to step back rather than “STEP ACROSS”

There is the **Mountain of Misunderstanding**...

We are all human beings and thus, we are all flawed...not only that we don't listen well...Thus, there will be miscommunication and misinterpretation. Furthermore, we would like everyone to be like us but unfortunately God likes variety and has created each of us with different gifts, personalities, and passions. Thus, there are differences of opinion. Instead of communicating, sitting down and talking it out, attempting to see where the other is coming from and appreciating the gifts they bring to the table...we fail to understand the person on the other side of the table from us. There are relationships within our families, within our church, within our community that are broken because of a simple misunderstanding, because of an unwillingness look past the flaws, the words, the differences in opinion and personality, and understand.

James 1:19 (NIV) - *My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry...*

There is the **Mountain of Me-First**...

How often our “self” gets in the way...We want our way...We want to be in control...We want to be the center of attention. Often instead of asking what we can do for our spouse, our church family, our community...we are wondering what they can do for us? The entire Christian walk is about dying to self...it is a long and painful death, much like crucifixion...the criminal sometimes lingering on for days before succumbing to death...We must ask God to continue to help us push “ME” aside, helping us focus on others ahead of ourselves...

Paul wrote, in Philippians 2:3 (NIV), “*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.*”

And there is the mountain is **THE MOUNTAIN OF MISTAKES**.

We all make mistakes. Just as we have misunderstandings and the desire to put ourselves first, we all have faults...we all mess up. Every one of us has been hurt when someone else has wronged us. And it's so easy when you're hurt in a relationship to allow bitterness to grow around your heart to protect yourself from being hurt again...this mountain of bitterness poisons your relationship...it creates a chasm that becomes harder and harder to "STEP ACROSS"...

We must allow for one another's mistakes...We must show grace when those we care about, when our neighbors, when our pastor, messes up...the same grace we have been shown through Jesus Christ. We must not allow bitterness to build up when others let us down...We must learn to forgive...

Paul tells us in Colossians 3:13 (NLT), "***Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.***"

Understand there will be times when the chasm is too deep, the gorge too wide...



...the other person will not listen to you, will continue to be selfish, will refuse to accept the forgiveness you offer...And remember, forgiving and loving another does not always mean the relationship will be restored, it does not mean we excuse the person's behavior, it does not mean we surrender our right to justice, it does not mean we invite someone who hurt us once to hurt us again...

As Lewis Smedes writes, in his book, The Art of Forgiving, "...when we are the ones who have been hurt, we simply cannot afford to wait for the other person to come to his senses before we begin healing ourselves...Each time we grope our reluctant way through the minor miracle of forgiving, we are imitating [God's] style...***When we forgive, we set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner we set free is us...***"

You must remember that it is not about them...it is not about their response...their behavior...

Mother Teresa once wrote,



*People are often unreasonable, illogical and self-centered;
Forgive them anyway.*

*If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives;
Be kind anyway.*

*If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies;
Succeed anyway.*

*If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you;
Be honest and frank anyway.*

*What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight;
Build anyway.*

*If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous;
Be happy anyway.*

*The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow;
Do good anyway.*

*Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough;
Give the world the best you've got anyway.*

***You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and your God;
It was never between you and them anyway.***

We listen, put others first, and forgive because God commands us, because God modeled the way we should live through His Son, Jesus Christ...

On the night of His arrest, celebrating the Passover meal with His disciples...



...Jesus knelt and washed the disciples' feet, including the feet of the one who He knew would soon betray Him...

John writes, John 13:1 (NIV), *“It was just before the Passover Feast...Jesus knew that the time had come for Him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved His own who were in the world, He now showed them the full extent of His love.”*

Jesus said to His disciples...John 13: 14-15 (NIV) - *Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.*

We Must “STEP ACROSS” The Chasm Of Broken Relationships. This is only possible through the power of the cross...

It is time to write that letter...It is time to make that phone call...It is time to cherish the people God has placed in your life...It is time serve your neighbor...to adore your spouse...to talk with your children...

It is time to forgive, truly forgive, those who have wronged you, to let the bitterness go...It is time to ask forgiveness from those whom you have wronged, to admit your mistakes...It is time to push “self” out of the way...



Step up the mountain and allow God to fill you with His Spirit, His strength...It is time to “STEP ACROSS” whatever chasm exists between you and another...TODAY...NOW...Not some day...TODAY...