

2024 09 06 Gathering Sunday: Gelassenheit

Psalm 146 - Do not put your trust in princes

Matt 20:22-28 - Serve one another.

It is Gathering Sunday at TUMC! Once a week, God gathers us together to experience something different. Today we talk about 'Gelassenheit'. This is one of those evocative German words that has no direct translation into English. It has a long history in Anabaptist and Mennonite practice, referencing a different way of being that is open to God. Next year is the 500th anniversary of a key event in the history of the Anabaptist movement: when people in Zurich chose to rebaptise one other following a mature decision to follow Jesus. In the next few Sundays we'll be welcoming nine new members, and they will be sharing with us. We'll be looking at some of the concepts and ideas that have shaped Anabaptism, beginning today with Gelassenheit.

Gelassenheit is most often translated as 'yieldedness', meaning that the individual is able to yield to the will of God. By letting go of your own intentions and ideas, Gelassenheit is openness to God's intentions.

In **history**, the choice of martyrs to continue to witness to the truth even when facing death is Gelassenheit.

In **community**, sharing material resources and restraining selfish desire is Gelassenheit.

In **mysticism**, the loss of the self and the surrender of the ego to the power and presence of God is Gelassenheit.

In **Anabaptist history** the term has been reinterpreted, borrowed, or discarded. For me, Gelassenheit is present **in our congregational** discernment and discussion, as we intentionally choose a consensus system to ensure that everyone can speak to an

issue. We yield to one another, trusting that God's Spirit is present in our discernment, and that the outcome is guided by God.

In **activism**, Gelassenheit is the ability to stand or sit with silence and composure, refusing to be baited or scared away by violent rhetoric or the use of violent force. It is the belief that God's message of love and reconciliation cannot be imposed or forced, only yielded to.

Jesus brought the foundation for Gelassenheit to his followers in his life and teaching, although the gospels are different in how they represent Jesus. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus is more emotional, angry, and passionate. In Luke and John, Jesus is more serene, philosophical and steadfast. Our reading today was from Matthew, as Jesus instructed his friends to serve one another rather than lording it over each other. To let go of their desire for status. A key theme in the New Testament is the need for patient endurance and the belief that God is working even when we are still. And Psalm 146 reminds us that God is the source of well-being, not human rulers. These ideas help to shape and interpret Gelassenheit.

More than a dozen words and phrases are used to translate Gelassenheit into English. For example:

- Humility
- Meekness
- Resignation

These tell us that Gelassenheit is an attitude of restraint and sober conviction. It is not weakness, but the choice not to use strength in unhelpful or harmful ways. The person believes that there is a right way to act, and is committed to take no other action.

- Tranquility
- Serenity
- Imperturbability.

The person is present and connected to reality, without being driven by other people's strong emotion. They help others find emotional regulation and avoid reacting without thought and compassion.

- Poise
- Composure
- Relaxation.

It is the ability to maintain boundaries and rest, even when there is stress and anxiety around. It is measured and careful without being frantic and false. Can you think of people who remind you of Gelassenheit? Maybe it's you?

This yielding assumes that there is a path that God has established, and that we are meant to follow it. Gelassenheit sometimes sounds quite boring. You are mostly 'not doing' things - not resisting, not arguing, not trying. It feels very old fashioned, somehow - Gelassenheit does not seem to be in keeping with the spirit of our times, it's not a hot take or a bold stance or a mic drop. We may be more sympathetic to people who struggle, innovate, and advocate. People who refuse to yield.

Strangely enough, in our scriptures there are plenty of stories of people disputing with God, and this struggle is valued and respected by God. When God plans to destroy a city because of the evil people living there, Abraham negotiates for their lives. When five sisters named Mahlah, Milcah, Noa, Tirzah and Hoglah criticise God's law of inheritance, God agrees that the law is better with the amendment they propose. The God of the Old Testament seems to be open to compromise. Even the story of the testing of Abraham's faith has been interpreted that God wanted Abraham to argue, even to refuse a divine command.

In the New Testament, things seem to have shifted in favour of yielding. In his hour of trial, Jesus asks to be released from the violence that awaits him, but he accepts it in the service of God's plan for humanity. Peter argues with a vision telling him to accept the things he previously understood to be unclean, but when he wakes he is willing to welcome in the people he had tried to exclude before. God doesn't

compromise or negotiate in the New Testament, and that seems to set the stage for Gelassenheit.

Yielding to God. Complete surrender, to quote the early Anabaptists 'a true letting loose of all my wills and desires'. It's an intimidating ideal. The more I read about the absolute serenity of Gelassenheit, the more stressed I get! It seems superhuman and maybe a bit inhuman - the refusal to be swayed by the realities around. The more I think about what it would mean in any given situation to let go of control, the more I want to grab hold of this term and struggle with the definition. It's quite a paradox!

My struggle starts with the idea of prioritizing Gelassenheit as a spiritual virtue, because of how this tends towards spiritual abuse. Asking someone to submit sets off alarm bells, and rightly so. These teachings are easily used to silence critics and empower abuse, and not just within Anabaptist communities. Sacrifice, service and suffering make a convenient way to suppress dissent by praising compliance. Every empire honours the so-called sacrifice of its soldiers, and neglects the wellbeing of the survivors. Every workplace appreciates the labour of those who serve, but then restricts sick days and wage increases and COVID safety measures. Every community knows how to acknowledge suffering without taking steps to address it.

Sacrifice, service and suffering are words that carry significant meaning in Christian theology. The life and teachings of Jesus give new emphasis to sacrifice, service, and suffering. I think the change in perspective is that those who suffer, serve, and who are sacrificed, are not considered losers in God's kingdom. Those who suffer, serve, and are sacrificed are instead the leaders and prophets. They do not earn this glory by submitting to harm, like a prize for endurance or a court settlement for damages.

But instead by submitting to God's call and serving faithfully regardless of how well or poorly others treat them, they are living out their true identity and calling. They might be called losers or all kinds of names, they might be punished and be blamed for being weak. But their patient endurance brings into focus the life of Jesus.

Peter Haresnape

Gelassenheit then is not a goal that followers of Jesus need to aim towards or achieve in order to be holy. It is not a standard of behaviour to be imposed and rewarded. But it can be a wonderful model to follow, a practice of peaceful presence that strengthens the individual and the community towards just action. You can't be told to be 'more gelassenheit'.

One way of understanding Gelassenheit is that it lets go of the things that are outside of our control, and the things that should not be in our control. Revenge, for example. We know that evil and injustice exist in our world, and that suffering demands a response. Justice is seldom seen in our lives. Human forms of justice are flawed, and often focus on punishment and prevention rather than restoration and healing. God's justice may not reach fulfilment in our lives, but that doesn't mean that we can do any better by taking matters into our own hands. Gelassenheit asks followers of Jesus not to seek revenge themselves, but it does not deny the reality of injustice. Indeed, it treats injustice seriously, as a loss so complex and profound that human fumbling is liable to make it worse.

When you consider everything that is wrong in the world, passivity of any sort feels wrong. If you are someone who carries greater privilege, you know that you have duties and opportunities to act. But you also know that your own efforts will not be enough to restore justice. Power and privilege are not superpowers given to you to save other people - they are stolen and appropriated, and the first thing you need to learn how to do is not act. And then, how to act in wise solidarity. How to be led - how to yield.

The presence of injustice demands a response, but a frantic rush to implement solutions cuts out the wisdom of those most affected and reinforces the power structure. Can Gelassenheit help to find the middle ground?

I do think that Gelassenheit rests on a particular set of beliefs about God. If you don't believe in God, or you do not believe that God is good and just and faithful, then Gelassenheit is foolishness or cowardice, avoiding responsibility.

Last week Randy talked about the foolishness of the Gospel. As the scriptures were read and as I listened, I heard some familiar words very differently. The world we live in is full of empty promises and delusions. The world around us turns a blind eye to human suffering from wars near and far, in our neighbourhoods, and in our homes. The world around us encourages us to invest wisely and eat healthily and save for retirement while the living systems that sustain us are being polluted, clear-cut, and privatized. The solution to every problem seems to be either to hope that a solution will emerge, or vote for increasingly vague politicians.

To borrow from last week's scripture: "Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"

If you believe in the wisdom of the world, then the Gospel sounds like foolishness, because Jesus was killed by the wisdom of the world, and his followers ran away, and we continue to be weak and foolish and cowardly to the present day. But if you see that the world as we have made it does not have any other solutions, perhaps you will say with St Paul: "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

The psalm says:

"I will praise the Lord as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

Do not put your trust in princes,

in mortals, in whom there is no help.

When their breath departs, they return to the earth;

on that very day their plans perish.

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,

whose hope is in the Lord their God,

who made heaven and earth,

the sea, and all that is in them;

who keeps faith forever;  
    who executes justice for the oppressed;  
    who gives food to the hungry."

It means something that we come here each week and reassert this foolishness, that God loves the world, and that God is faithful to their promises, and they feed the hungry, and bring justice for the oppressed. But to submit to that vision is something more. Outwardly it looks like serenity and clarity and sincerity, which comes from a core of trust in God and a willingness to set aside your own goals and ambitions. Gelassenheit is not the end goal of the Christian life, but it is a mode that we should all aspire to practice as we try to represent God's love.

Submission to God can also mean resistance to the things that deny God's truth. When the algorithm tries to sell you happiness by purchasing, posing, and polemic, submitting to God could mean logging off, and spending time as part of God's creation. When words are used to define and restrain your expression of self - words that limit your potential or condemn your being, submitting to God's truth means embracing that God calls you a beloved child, and invites you to the table. When you are told by a church leader or some random man to be humble and thankful, submitting instead to God means not being silenced and isolated. It means telling the truth to those around you and building a community to practice abundant life.

I don't expect everyone here to become serene ascended masters. It is difficult and unsettling to consider yielding to God - the very words involved are cause for concern! But if there truly is life-giving wisdom which is better than the entertainment-obsessed culture of distraction that surrounds us, it is worth attempting. God has given us what we need to attempt this. The Holy Spirit as Comforter and Guide. The community to support and nurture. The narrative of scripture to uphold and inspire us. And songs in the night he giveth. We have our creative inheritance of song and prayer to help shape our spirits through difficult times. Let's continue that together by singing to conclude our service.

*My Life Flows On*

## Sources

Appreciation to Michele R. for sharing her paper on the topic.

Meekness, a tolerant, yielding spirit, represents having the right of way but not insisting on it. Jesus Christ sets the tone of this approach in His discussion with the sons of Zebedee and the other disciples. Many have looked upon meekness, lowliness of spirit, or the willingness to yield, with suspicion and perhaps even loathing. Meekness—or its common perception—may seem too much like weakness, wimpiness, or timidity.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%201%3A18-26&version=NRSVUE>

An article on how Gelassenheit functions as the personal expression of *Koinonia* (community). A quote:

Jesus comments that where two or three people are gathered in His name, He is present with them. Now not just any gathering of two or three explains why He is present. Two or three child-like persons, communicating with each other, sharing burdens with each other, fellowshiping at heart levels, together reverently obedient, exhorting and encouraging each other, rebuking sin in each other, praying together, working together, trusting each other, blessing each other, forgiving each other, learning together sorrowing together, and more explain why this is happening.

<https://anabaptistperspectives.org/essays/the-power-question-gelassenheit-and-koinonia>

A podcast/interview on Gelassenheit (from which I took many of the terms used to translate into English)

<https://anabaptistperspectives.org/episodes/gelassenheit-humble-yieldedness>

An article on Gelassenheit

<http://fountainoflifeministry.org/printed-sermons/our-anabaptist-fore-fathers/gelassenheit-complete-surrender/>