

WNMC Homily – October 29, 2017 – Bert C Lobe
Cripples All of Us

““He called those who had been invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come”
Mathew 22:3

In his novel **Goderic** Frederick Buechner tells this story:

There was Gildas with but one leg and Brendon sure he had misspent his whole life entirely. “I’m crippled as the dark world” Gildas said...if it comes to that which one of us isn’t?” Brendon said. He had left his wife; he had buried his only boy. “We was cripples all of us...to lend each other a hand when we are falling, perhaps that is the only work that matters in the end.”

I want to suggest this morning that living with our crippledness requires a sense of **gelassenheit**, a yielding or acceptance of that which is most difficult; the capacity and will to bear well the weight of great sadness. This morning’s texts point to this elusive quality of **gelassenheit**...this unperturbed calmness of the soul – **seelen frieden**, this sense of aloofness from the turmoil and strife of life. I want to believe that we best embodied that a while back when we were **die stille im lande**.

The first story takes us to Mount Nebo where Moses, the Israelites and Joshua look out over the land promised to Israel: after exile in Egypt and Exodus, 40 years of struggle upon escape from Egypt, here they are looking out over the fertile Jordan Valley, Jerusalem, Hebron, Bethlehem, Qumran, Jericho, and the Dead Sea. It is over powering. This is where Yahweh shows Moses the Promised Land! This is the story of Jacob and Joseph and his brothers and their life in Egypt and their return home to the Promised Land. I learned about the wilderness and Promised Land when I was little. In 1993 the Franciscans bought Mount Nebo and excavated it and today there is a Byzantine church whose floors are covered with floral motifs. Pope John Paul visited in 2009 and planted an olive tree. Overlooking the valley there is a bronze statue of a serpent, a symbol of Moses in the wilderness, but in the form of a cross.

But Moses, why could he not enter the land with his people? We are told that Moses became irritated with Yahweh when the people “complained bad” about no meat, about no water and wanted to return to Egypt.. “Who will give us meat to eat? We remember Egypt where we ate melons, cucumbers, onions and garlic and fish...now, who will give us to eat? Now our strength is dried up. How shall we sing the Lord’s song in this condition?” Moses relationship with the people is waning and he is distraught. Moses is reported to have taken the criticism personally and he rails against Yahweh. Yahweh responds, “I’ll give you meat until you are sick of it” and Moses does not believe it. Moses flies afoul of Yahweh. And about water: Moses says, “Listen you rebels, shall we have water from a rock?” and he strikes the rock rather than simply addressing the rock. Moses shamed Yahweh in front of Israel. Psalm 103 says that Moses’

“heart was made bitter”. Moses looks longingly over the Jordan Valley, and is told that he cannot lead his people home. It feels harsh...I wonder how he dealt with it? Sadly, sometimes one must be broken before healing can begin! He has no option but to accept the verdict. He dies at 120, apparently in good health and with good eyesight; he dies without having completed the journey. Can you imagine Peter and Elfrieda Dyck being called off the boat loaded with Mennonites enroute to Paraguay in Germany and told to come home because of some miscommunication?

Moses exhibits two flaws: he was angry and he was impatient. He could not bear the criticism. Why do leaders stumble? Because they fail to bear well the weight of great disappointment, of failure and criticism. Moses could not reach a state of *gelassenheit*, and thus was not allowed to take his people home.

The second story occurs shortly after the triumphal entry. We find Jesus telling stories and asking questions of the Jewish establishment. What is to be done when a king invites his own people, his best friends and family to a wedding feast and they spurn the invitation? Only outsiders have the good sense to accept the invitation. It is provoking in that the suggestion appears to be that their refusal to accept him as Messiah they are rejecting the Kingdom of God which he has so dramatically called for. And thus, with Israel failing to accept Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, and Jesus being crucified for his call to be in the world in a new way, we find the disciples, Paul and his colleagues making a concrete effort to plant churches...why? Because the responsibility for the creation of a new humanity, of a new way of being in the world has shifted from Israel to the church.

Jesus, more than a nice guy?” In 1989 I was teaching a class Judaism and Islam to grade 13 students at Rockway Mennonite Collegiate. I had invited Rabbi Berman (an American from Brooklyn) from the Kitchener Synagogue in to help us understand the basic tenants of Judaism and its modern day practice. We had done our homework and were ready to engage him. He went on too long and I could tell he was losing the students so I interrupted him and asked , so, what do you think of Jesus. “Jesus”, he said, “he was a nice guy, a good Jew.”

There is much written in our post religious time about the deep need for meaning and inspiration. There is among us some discomfort with the creeds, and the invitation to accept Jesus, as the Son of God, the promised Messiah, our saviour, about life after death is such a leap. The place of wonder and mystery must remain alive if we are to live into this good news of the gospel. These questions are shrouded in mystery, wonder and our own desire to believe, but to believe what? For many, Jesus of Nazareth is simply a superb human being, an example and primary guide for our lives There are so many books in our time which praise the historical Jesus, which find answers in Jesus for those who don't believe: **Christianity Without God** (by Lloyd Geering c 2002), **When Jesus Became God** by Richard Rubenstein c1999). Tom

Krattemmaker's c 2016 *Confessions of a Secular Jesus Follower* finds answers to life's most perplexing problems among those who find answers in Jesus but who simply don't believe. There are those who argue that in place of doctrine and creeds what we most need is a new vision of Jesus which focuses on our spirit, our culture and a life of discipleship (Marcus Borg *Jesus – A New Vision*).

The third story describes the second visit which Paul, Silvanus and Timothy made to Thessalonica, already one of the thriving cities connecting Rome to the Mediterranean and beyond. They came from Philippi, travelling some 150 kms on the famous highway the Via Egnatia. They were missionaries...vigorous ambassadors of the gospel.

Rebuilt in 325 BCE by Alexander the Great's brother in law Thessalonica became the capital of Macedonia and was home to two fertility cults, the religions of Dionysius (the dying and rising God). Life and its expressions were highly sexual, with expressions in phallic symbols, sexual indulgences and wild orgies common. Early on this subject of sexuality and being a faithful church was front and center!

It is to this setting that Paul, Timothy and Silvanus came to plant the church. They came from Philippi, where initially they had been ridiculed and insulted. They were met with opposition but persevered and endeared themselves to the people. ...they were "gentle among them." They come approved and entrusted!! They supported themselves with manual labor (Paul, a tent maker) both because they needed to eat but also because they wanted to be beholden to no one; it was in keeping with Paul's understanding of Jesus' teaching that "those who received the gospel should support those who brought it to them." The letter describes the three as childlike and humble, rather than domineering and demanding. Their world, the world of the Greeks, was full of wandering teachers who sought to survive by their wits and Paul was careful to pay his own way and behave in gentle and childlike ways so that he could not be criticized. Nevertheless the church in Philippi sent them funds.

There developed a strong sense among the believers of loyalty and mutual affection. Paul's presence suggests a sense of authority, but no of power. He is authentic and believable...he has a sense of vocation. He knows himself to be "entrusted with the gospel." They did not come with flattering speech or any sense of entitlement...they did not use ministry as a cover up for lining their own pockets, and they do not come seeking honor but to build a movement. Their ministry was misunderstood. They were likely there a few months. The church was composed of mainly Gentile believers; Paul preached in the synagogue only three times.

After Paul left them, they suffered and Paul wrote letters of encouragement and warning. Paul tried at least twice to revisit Thessalonica but failed...he was anxious about folks in the church and sent Timothy back to visit and he brought back an encouraging report.

The letters to the churches in Thessalonica are dominated by two great emphases: the first is thanksgiving for their having heard and responded to the gospel and the second a deep desire that they would remain faithful. Coming out of paganism, much of the Christian message was difficult to understand, especially regarding relations of the sexes and fidelity.

What is it that we take with us from these three stories? ***The gelassenheit posture does not come easily!!*** I know of that which I speak!

The best and current example of a leader who embodied ***gelassenheit*** that I know of is Robert E Kreider. Bob died in 2015 in Bluffton, Ohio. He was 94; he was our Moses! I travelled China and with Bob (he travelled with two heavy suitcases filled with books for those he met), and sat through many MCC Executive and Board meetings where Bob was present. Bob was an active listener, he had that capacity for both candor and kindness. He insisted that we identify our differences and work at them. He was a weaver of truth, a builder of bridges. He was as close to the church and its institutions from 1940 until his death as anyone.

Bob is remembered for leading in the establishment of the Teachers Abroad Program in post-colonial Africa; for speaking against war and holding up his CPS service. Bob understood what is required if we are to “be in the world in the manner and spirit of Jesus. “In May of 2012, at 92, and very stooped over and fragile, Bob delivered a kind of eulogy at the service where MCC bi national was legally disbanded. It was immensely saddening. Bent over and saddened this leader understood ***gelassenheit!*** The two new national MCC’s, we agreed later, must be, indeed would be, like trees planted by a river of water.

How do we call, hold up and bless leaders so they do not get fed up with the criticism and the impatience which surrounds them? How to insure that our leaders are ready to enter the Promised Land! Bob was ready!! Who are the great leaders you remember, who understood the importance of *gelassenheit*? David Toews, Bob Kreider...

Bert C Lobe

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