

Renewal through Yieldedness: Becoming like Children

A sermon preached by Zac Klassen at BMC on Sunday, January 26, 2025

Good morning. As I prepared to preach this sermon today on the topic of “Renewal through Trust and Yieldedness, I was excited to flip through the new Anabaptist Community Bible and look to our scripture reading today to see what insights I could gain from some of the new features of this bible. Some of those neat features include 40 pieces of artwork in the woodcut style, marginal notes from Anabaptist Biblical scholars which give greater context to certain passages of scripture, marginal notes submitted by Anabaptist communities (including BMC) who were given certain biblical passages to study and comment on; and finally, marginal notes including quotations from Anabaptist writings relevant to certain biblical passages. As I turned to Matthew 18, our passage for today, I encountered this quotation from the Dutch Anabaptist Dirk Philips, who was a friend of Menno Simons:

“Since Christ has now set the children as an example for us and said that we should become as children and humble ourselves, it follows from this without any contradiction that children—so long as they are in their simplicity—are guiltless and reckoned as without sin by God.”

There’s a whole lot going on in this quotation and while we don’t have time to get into it all during this sermon, it does give us a little bit of insight as to the early Anabaptist theological convictions regarding the status of children in relation to the question of guilt and salvation. No need to baptize babies or children, they would say, for they are free of sin. One of the key functions of infant baptism, after all, is to wash away the stain of original sin, a notable Catholic doctrine that many Anabaptists weren’t really all that interested in. By and large, Anabaptists tended to affirm that even if it could be said that children were impacted by the reality of sin, Christ’s atoning death had covered them, “reckoning” them as Dirk Philips said, as “without sin

by God.” That said, Anabaptist writers were aware that, as children grow up, leaving the guiltless simplicity of childhood and grow into an awareness of their choices and the responsibility they bear for them, they become more fully aware of the calling of Jesus to newness of life through faith in him and allegiance to his kingdom. At that point of awareness, a choice must be made – they must decide whether or not to follow Jesus. Baptism then—at that point—becomes a crucial public ritual witnessing to the choice to live as a disciple of Jesus and seek first God’s kingdom. There is a trajectory, in other words, to the life of faith – a maturing and growth that occurs, and that maturity brings with it a greater measure of responsibility for how one decides to use one’s freedom and will.

What struck me as I mulled over this sermon topic, however, was the tension I began to feel – or maybe you could even call it an irony that I began to sense – between the image of baptism and discipleship as, on the one hand, a sign of “growing up” and “taking responsibility” for one’s decisions, and the image of baptism and discipleship as on the other hand, a sign of turning around and reversing course, as it were, to a “simplicity” of our wills and a “humility” that is more reminiscent of childhood than it is of “responsible” adulthood.

In Matthew 18, after all, Jesus says:

I assure you that if you don’t turn your lives around and become like this little child, you will definitely not enter the kingdom of heaven. Those who *humble themselves* like this little child will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

As was at least partially explored in experiencing the story, the humility of children that Jesus refers to here involves not simply an admirable character trait of a meek and mild child (we all know there can be examples to the contrary), but perhaps more fundamentally their status or stature in the world. Children both back then and now are not, typically, the social and political actors that determine the shape of our world systems – they are not, in that sense, what the world

would call “the greatest.” Positively, of course, children are the benefactors of kingdoms and communities that create and foster systems of well-being. Negatively and tragically, too, children are often the victims of kingdoms and communities that create destruction and trauma through the hubris and greed of adults seeking “greatness.” The “humility” of children, then, is in large measure that they do not govern or control the world the way us adults try to. Their freedom and their choices are, to put it bluntly, subordinated to the will of those with more power than them. And so, they face both the promise and the peril of a world bent either towards compassion and welcome or towards disregard and rejection.¹ Jesus’ words suggest that these vulnerable ones, these lowly and precious children who don’t hold the reigns of worldly power, are the standard set for what makes one great in the kingdom of heaven. God has a special regard and care for them. In a world bent on raising productive, independent adult members of society, this truly is a counter-cultural teaching – as many of Jesus’ teachings are.

As I thought about Jesus’ words about children along with the Anabaptist emphasis on baptism and discipleship as involving a decision about how to use one’s freedom and will, I began to wonder. I began to wonder if part of the renewal Christ calls us to as Anabaptists today will involve us in recovering a child-like humility that we’ve lost in our desire to be “great,” independent, strong-willed, and self-sufficient adults in an admittedly hostile world where we vie for independence, control, and security. Fortunately, there are resources within our tradition that can help us in recovering this child-like humility. There is a significant word used by several early Anabaptists to describe the life of humble discipleship – a word they borrowed from German mystics before them – and that word is *Gelassenheit*. Out of curiosity, who in this room has heard it before? It is a German term that I understand really cannot be translated into English

¹ In Greco-Roman culture, infants were sometimes rejected at birth, a practice referred to as “exposure.”

with any exactness, but that means variously something like “Yieldedness,” “self-surrender,” “resignation,” “tranquility,” or even “laidbackness.” For many Anabaptists, this word captured powerfully the task of Jesus’ disciples to not take control of their world in the style of the rulers of the day – like children who didn’t rule the kingdoms of the world around them, they were to follow faithfully, obediently in the path Jesus had forged; they were to be servants of all; they were to humble themselves instead of exalting themselves. They were to yield their will to God’s will, praying “your will be done,” and they were to accept Jesus’ call to “take up your cross and follow.” Baptism was a central rite in this process of yielding, because it was a public witness to one’s yielding to Christ, no matter the cost.

Ironically, the practice of *Gelassenheit* by the early Anabaptist martyrs was seen as anything *but* humble by the governing authorities. In fact, if you would have asked the leaders of the kingdoms at the time what words they would use to describe Anabaptists, they would probably have said something more like “they act like rebellious children” – they disrupt the public order – they are “nasty,” “ungracious,” and disrespectful.² This fact helpfully points out for us, I think, that “yielding” to God in child-like humility is not about being a submissive, passive rule follower in the world because there’s no point trying to lead or control our lives. Rather, “yielding” is about submitting one’s will to a will *more authoritative* than the many “wills” vying for control around us in the world. God’s will, as revealed in the justice seeking, mercy loving, and humble life of Jesus, is the will that Christians are called to humbly “submit” to – and at times this submission might look like rebellion to others who attempt to have their will done on earth.

² This is a nod to the brave actions of Episcopal Bishop Right Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington who, in a humble demeanor but with conviction, asked newly re-elected President Donald Trump to have mercy on disadvantaged people.

This reframes, for us, I think, how children might also be an image of the kingdom. While I hasten to say that “rebelliousness” is not a quality that I particularly like among my own children, I think all parents have to reckon with the fact that one of the primary tasks that we have as Christian parents is to raise our children to not simply do “our will,” no questions asked, but to learn *along with us* what it means to do the will of God in following in the way of Jesus. As parents, while we exercise necessary authority, we are nonetheless also to model yielding to God’s will to our children as we nurture and care for them so they can learn to do the same. One of the ways this occurs in later parenting years is in our “yielding” our will for the shape and direction of our children’s lives to God, even as we had been tasked to provide all the love, nurture, and direction we could for them to hear and respond to Jesus’ call early in life.

So, where does this exploration of child-like humility and *Gelassenheit* leave us? In the worship materials provided by the Anabaptism at 500 committee, the focus statement for this Sunday says this:

By yielding their lives to serve the reign of God above all, the early Anabaptists learned to trust Jesus and obey his call to follow him in everything they did. Today, many Anabaptists have lost any understanding or practice of *Gelassenheit*. As we learn again to yield our lives to God and prayerfully immerse ourselves in the story and teachings of Jesus, we too may be renewed in the joy that comes from trusting and obeying God’s call to live justly, love mercy, and walk humbly in the Jesus way.

If the writers of this material are right, and it’s true that many Anabaptists have lost any understanding or practice of *Gelassenheit*, maybe it’s time to recover or at least renew our attention towards it. I do think it is important to say that there will likely be some dangers or possible stumbling blocks along the path to recovering a greater understanding and practice of “Yielding” or trusting God in all we do. As church communities, we need to be careful to listen to *the whole priesthood of believers* for wisdom in discerning what parts of our lives we need to re-consider as we think about yielding to God. Listening to the whole body of Christ in this

regard is important, since throughout our Anabaptist-Mennonite history some have been unequally burdened with the task to “submit” and “yield.” Determining the “will of God” that we must submit to in numerous circumstances can be and often is a difficult process. As a repentant church (our theme from last week), we have to admit that sometimes the admonition to “submit” or simply “trust God” with a particular matter has also led us to avoid facing God’s call to do justice at times. Yieldedness, we must be careful to confess, is not giving up on acting in the face of injustice, rather, it is precisely giving up on our all-too-common tendency to let our wills and desires stop us from living like Jesus in seeking justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly “in the Jesus way.”

If we are to recover a discipline of discerning together those areas of our lives that we could use more help in yielding to God’s will, perhaps that is the task we must attend to starting now! While there will be more time during worship response to talk about and brainstorm this, I thought we could do some initial brainstorming together even now and so I’ve put a question on the slide that will help us brainstorm a bit and I’ll have a piece of paper out to mark down responses down too:

What are areas of our lives where we are convinced that “our will” must be done? How might we practice *Gelassenheit* in these areas, so that “God’s will” is done?

Thanks for your responses.

As we move forward together, yielding our lives to God, may God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven. AMEN