

Sermon

**At 1st Sunday after Easter
11. April 2021
Mennonite Church, Hamburg-Altona**

Text: Romans 14

Tolerance – An impossible possibility

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen,

Dear congregation!

Tolerance is an "impossible possibility"! - This is what we have discovered during the past days of our meeting of Mennonite theology students in Europe. We told each other about the challenges in the Netherlands, in Switzerland or even in Colombia: Different people want - and have to - live together in our enlightened, secular, societies. Different age groups! Different genders! Different denominations and religions! Different languages! Different ethnic groups! People with different stories and experiences!

This is already visible on a small scale: here in our Mennonite congregation, for example. There are the most diverse needs of the older and the younger. Women and men. Different types of piety. People "with migration background" and those who have always been in Hamburg. Different life stories. Different economic circumstances. Different views - for example also with regard to the Corona rules. And yes, we "tolerate" everyone here with his or her opinion, don't we? After all, we are a community. After all, we live in a "tolerant" society.

But is this really "tolerance"? we have asked ourselves in recent days. Or do we basically just accept that others are different? And as long as this otherness of others doesn't affect us, doesn't restrict us, doesn't call our own identity into question, we "generously" tolerate the other.

We Mennonites were often simply "tolerated" in history. Well, that was much better than being persecuted. But in many cases it did not mean that we had the same rights as other citizens. For a long time, Mennonites were "tolerated" in Hamburg, but they were not allowed to buy land in the city. This was reserved for the Lutherans. It was clearly defined by the state authorities what was "normal" (to be a Lutheran) and what deviated from this "norm": Reformed, Jews, Catholics, Mennonites. These were "different" and were - what actually? Tolerated? Left alone? Not noticed as long as they did not disturb the "public order"? As long as they subordinated themselves to the "norm". "To tolerate is to offend" (says Goethe).

Basically, this is quite convenient, at least if one has the power to determine what is considered "normal". In the end, however, this means: Those in power can preserve the status quo. The other is basically indifferent to me, as long as they do not cause any trouble! They have to submit to my norm. (In Germany, a right-wing political party meets this weekend for its party congress under the slogan: "Germany - but normal").

Tolerance is something else! Tolerance actually means "to endure" (lat. "tolerare"). The students found other synonyms: to suffer, to fight for something, to respect, to engage, to share spaces, to stand up for others. I bear the otherness of others. This is more than enduring. Tolerance means putting up with something even though it doesn't match my own beliefs. Do I tolerate that there are people in our society who do not conform to the "norm"? Do I tolerate that there are Corona deniers who demonstrate in the streets without masks or distance? Do I tolerate that Muslim women attach importance to the fact that they want to wear their hijabs even as teachers? Do I tolerate that there are not only the male and the female gender, but also queer people?

And even more difficult: Do I tolerate that some people abort unborn life or advocate active assisted suicide? Can I tolerate that some people still think that we need nuclear weapons or that we have to wage war in Afghanistan? - How far does tolerance go? Do I have to "put up with" everything and everyone?

I can't bear to see refugees drowning in the Mediterranean because our European governments won't take them in! Should I still tolerate racists at the end? No! - I don't want to and I can't bear it! That is not right! That is impossible. - And yet it must be possible. Tolerance - An impossible possibility?

Let's seek advice in the Letter to the Romans. We read chapter 14 earlier. This text was also read during our conference. "Accept the weak in faith..." is the first sentence. Paul is concerned immediately and first about perspective! What does the power imbalance look like? This is his first question. Who decides here what should be tolerated? Who determines what is "normal"? And who suffers discrimination here? There are strong and there are weak. That is important.

Do I demand tolerance because I myself am oppressed?

Or am I asking for tolerance from those who are oppressed themselves?

As a black woman in Germany, do I demand more tolerance for Black Lives? Or do I as a white man demand more tolerance from a black woman to please adapt "here"? - Do you notice how different that suddenly sounds?

As a man, do I demand that the German language should not be "gendered"? Or as a woman?

Do I, as a heterosexual, demand that only same-sex marriages be performed? Or do I express myself as a homosexual on the subject? As a Mennonite with a "Mennonite name," do I make a comment about "ethnic Mennonites"? Or does someone with the name "Schmidtchen" or "Pacheco Lozano" say that? - Who are the strong ones here? Who are the weak? Who is discriminating here and who is being discriminated against?

- These are the crucial questions when we demand "tolerance"!

In Paul's case, it was mainly about the Jewish food commandments: some think that you have to keep them, others think that you are really freed from such "standardizations". Paul means: the strong should not despise the weak. And the weak should not judge the strong! "For" - and here comes the decisive reasoning: "God has accepted [both]!" - "Who are you to ... judge"? "He will stand, for God is able to uphold him". - Really? God can keep everyone upright? The black woman and the white man and the racist and the refugee, and the homosexual as well as the heterosexual?

Further in the text: "For to this end Christ died and came to life again, that he might be Lord over both the dead and the living". Wow! So this is not just about some rules of conduct. No, it's about my whole identity! We have just remembered Good Friday, and celebrated Easter Sunday. This all happened because God will hold each and every one of us "upright" so that we will "remain standing". "What are you judging your brother", your sister? "We will all be

brought before the judgment seat of God"! - "So now each and every one of us will give an account for ourselves to God"! - says Paul.

Dear congregation, tolerance is not simply about differing opinions! "Let each one be certain in his opinion," says Paul. So if there are different opinions - between meat eaters, vegetarians and vegans, or if it is about different music in worship, then stand up for your opinion!

But with all these conflicts: Tolerate one another. Bear with each other! Because God himself tolerates the other - also the very other! Also for them, Christ died and became alive again! So it became and becomes clear: God judges all of us - and just in this way brings us back to life. All! The text emphasizes this several times. So also the Muslim neighbor, the Jewish colleague, the Buddhist friend. God brings back to life the refugee woman who simply wants to survive, and yes, also the stupid racist - who clings to his privileges full of fear. God brings back to life the woman who has chosen to have a sex change operation so that she can finally be herself. God has died and risen for the Indígena in Colombia, for the Afghan who fled as a minor, and for the Hamburg merchant.

All are "tolerated" by God, supported by His infinite love. Also I, with my fears of the unknown. Also me, with my petty ideas of what is "normal". I, too, with my convictions of good and evil, right and wrong. Yes, I too - "raised up" by the love of God alone.

But what does that mean, dear community? Should we tolerate everything?

No - that is exactly what it does not mean! "For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit!" - says Paul. The kingdom of God - this space of mutual (bearing) one another established by God - is not about the preservation of man-made norms. The kingdom of God is not about norms, but always about relationships. Justice and peace! Justice for all - so that peace can be. So that joy can be - for all!

Yes, dear congregation, let us argue happily about our different opinions! Be strong in arguing! Stand up for your opinions and beliefs - to the best of your ability. But always keep this perspective of God in mind: God looks at the person! - His image. And God is in relationship! To all. Every human being is absolutely accepted by God - independent of all standardizations and constructed attempts of normalization! That is God's tolerance! God

bears you! God tolerates me. And all "others". Still. He "carries" us to a life of justice and peace. - For this "impossible possibility" Christ died and rose again.

Thanks be to God. Amen.