

on longing

scripture reading: Matthew 5:3-4

preacher: Robert Steiner

imperfections' gap

In their book *The Spirituality of Imperfection* Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham argue that „Without imperfection's gap between intentions and results there would be no story." In other words the very origin of so many of our stories takes us back to the everyday experience of a profound gap in our lives. This gap speaks to us of hopeful longings versus painful disappointments, of honest aspirations versus realistic expectations. The gap reminds us of the deep yearnings and constant limitations that come with being human. But such existential wrestling does not leave us alone. It births story upon story. It gives poetic expression to our longing for wholeness and peace within our own lives and the communities we are part of. Story upon story we are encouraged to preserve and protect our longing as a fundamental movement of our heart. For the greatest danger and terror would be a world without longing.

Sunday by Sunday we read and repeat, explore and rehearse the sacred stories that gave rise to the existence of our faith community and continue to sustain us. They are born from the same gap and encourage us to appreciate the productive and creative energy that comes with the dilemma of remaining true to our hopes and dreams. There is a Hassidic story which poignantly illustrates this connection between story and longing and insists that in the end all that matters is to remember the story.

it was sufficient

When the founder of Hasidic Judaism, the great Rabbi Israel Shem Tov, saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Maggid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go

to the same place in the forest and say: 'Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer,' and again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moseh-leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say, 'I do not know how to light the fire. I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient.' It was sufficient, and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhin to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: 'I am unable to light the fire, and I do not know the prayer, and I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient.' And it was sufficient.

For God made human beings because he loves stories.

(Recorded in *The Spirituality of Imperfection* by Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham.)

There are times when I want to intercede for others, step in for families or even communities that threaten to fall apart. But then I realize that I have forgotten how to light the fire, that I struggle to remember the special prayer, and that I even no longer know where to go to. The burden and grief is so overwhelming that all I can do is to try to remember the stories of my spiritual ancestors, my mothers and father of the faith, who knew how to respond, how to light the fire, what the special prayer is and where they needed to go to. Yes, to remember and tell their story *must* be sufficient.

Must? When the Hassidic masters say “must” then it is not an expression of Promethean pride or arrogance. It is rather the result of a combination of an admirable chutzpah and a deep conviction that the God of this universe, the creator of humankind, is a God who is deeply devoted to his or her creation. The knowledge of such love and compassion gives rise to the bold assertion that knowing and telling the stories must be enough to evoke God's empathy and response. Such storytelling on the one hand serves as a gentle reminder to God: Remember why you created us; remember your love for stories; remember your commitment to our longings and hopes for your creation. On the other hand it allows the conversation to continue. And as long as the conversation continues we find ourselves

in a relationship. And as long as the despair we experience and the confessions we have to make do not silence us, but are brought into our relationship with God, there is hope, there is promise, there is a future. *And it was sufficient.*

The gap between our good intentions and the actual results also contributes to a very compromised witness to God's love and care for all of creation. Some of our own children or grandchildren have become suspicious of our faith. They have picked up our half-heartedness and hypocrisy when it comes to confronting injustice and preserving creation. They have rightly rejected a patriarchal and authoritarian God who divides the world into good and bad, into believers and unbelievers. They have questioned our habits of lighting the fire and saying the prayer. And they have not found another place to go to. But will they at least remember the stories. And will we be able to at least tell those sacred stories with enough clarity and integrity? And will we be able to trust those stories to give birth to new ways of lighting the fire and saying the prayer?

And so, Sunday by Sunday, we keep reading and rehearsing those sacred stories. Every Gospel story invites us to meet the one who knew how to light the fire, to say the special prayer, and who knew where to go to. He was a master story-teller.

blessed are the poor in spirit and sorrowful

This morning's reading from the Beatitudes, takes us back to Jesus' inaugural speech, as composed and presented to us by the writer of Matthew's Gospel. We see and hear him speak to a crowd of people which could be described with Frantz Fanon as "the wretched of the earth." The writer of the Gospel sets the scene in Matthew 4:23-25. They come to see and hear him from all parts of the Roman province of Syria. It is a motley crew of people whose bodies and spirits are broken. They too have forgotten how to light the fire, to say the special prayer. They too do not know where to go to. And they have come to look for the one who remembers also those things and whose words and stories speak to their deep longing for healing and spiritual connection.

He begins by addressing them as the poor in Spirit, as the ones who experience a profound absence of God's pneuma in their lives, who feel forgotten and forsaken by their creator. Paradoxically he

addresses them all as blessed and fortunate. And one wonders, not without some cynicism, how anyone can call "the wretched of the earth" blessed. There are different ways of trying to make sense of this conundrum:

One could argue that they are blessed, because they are ready for the change Jesus promises to bring by inaugurating the reign of God. In other words, they know how bad things are, and therefore they will be the first to support this revolution. God's face is turned towards them, closer than ever, shining upon their deep longing for peace on earth.

But one could also slightly rephrase the beatitudes in the way that the priest and psychoanalyst Eugen Drewermann suggested: Blessed are those who allow themselves to feel that they are poor in spirit, that they are suffering injustice, that they are mourning, that they are angry and disillusioned. In other words, they are blessed, because they allow themselves to feel the pain and anger and this is always the first step towards transformation. They do not shy away from confronting not only the harsh reality that surrounds them, but also to engage with what it has done to them, where it has left them emotionally, psychologically, spiritually. Blessed are you, if you can be honest with yourself and your circumstances.

But such openness and honesty is also a blessing in the sense that it allows one to feel what some have described as something that is at the heart of our being and lives: A longing. The deep yearning for a better world and a more fulfilled life. In other words: Blessed are you, who mourn, for you know that things are not right. Blessed are you, for allowing yourselves to feel the sadness and loss in your own life, to resist cheap comfort, and to resist being distracted. Blessed are you to allow yourselves to feel the deep inner yearning for true and lasting comfort. You are ready for what I have come. Follow me!

Here he is, the new Moses, the one who knew where to go to: A new mountain. Here is the new prophet who knew how make a fire and make sure that it burns in every heart. Here is the son of God, who knew the special prayer, the Lord's prayer, and taught it to those who followed him. And here is the new Rabbi who knew about the power of story and taught through parables that will never be forgotten. And to remember his story must be sufficient. *And it was sufficient.* Sufficient to resist the cheap and quick comfort of "bread and games."

Sufficient to hold on to the fact that those who follow the new Moses are not people of the dusk, but of the dawn: They are not preparing for another night, but are coming out of the night and approaching a new dawn. "Kuyasa nangomso", an isiXhosa proverb affirms. "It shall dawn again tomorrow." For us this is more than stating the obvious or trusting the gift of a new day. With Christ's coming we have entered a new dawn which fills us with deep longings. We are invited to be honest about our poverty in Spirit and to acknowledge the pain that comes with imperfections' gap. But we are also encouraged to share the new story that arises from the depths of our experiences.

on longings and what is possible

In a recent NDR Kultur podcast Christian Modehn explores the inner dynamics of our longing. This fundamental movement in our heart is responsible for our restlessness and leads to life-giving departures. Stifling routines are interrupted, new places are discovered, what is superficial and mechanical is replaced by an experience of the real and authentic. We follow the age old dream for greater harmony and peace. We know that there is a deeper meaning and unity at the heart of our lives and also at the heart of our universe. And for once we make time to turn to such knowing and longing.

But for how long can one live with unfulfilled longings? Throughout history there have been influential thinkers who came to the point of disillusionment and distanced themselves from those inner longings for a better future and world. They tell us to turn to God alone and find our rest there. The church father Augustine and the philosopher Blaise Pascal would be two good examples. Interestingly Pascal, a gifted mathematician and inventor resisted the constant longing for technological progress, the yearning for always creating something new. He saw in it only a dangerous way of distracting ourselves from what is really important, our faith. Given the present dominance of an ideology that wants us to believe in endless progress, Pascal's resistance to constant newness has its merits and deserves further attention. But such resistance becomes problematic, when it is coupled with hoping to find salvation in the past, the glorious past of old orders and certainties, paradise lost, the good old fortresses of sacred certainty and safety. The present shift to the right in Europe, the attempts to go back to establish the old fortress called Europe, are all expressions of a yearning for harmony and unity, which seeks fulfilment in recovering an apparently glorious past, instead of daring

to seek fulfilment in a better and more promising future which includes everyone and not just the privileged. Psychologists describe such behaviour as regression. It matters if our longings are turned to the past or to the future.

The writer Robert Musil, among other philosophers and theologians offers a strong rationale for making sure that our longing is turned towards the future. In his novel *The Man without Qualities* Musil offers a kind of remedy against any form of nostalgia: *We human beings have a sense for the real. But what is real? Also that what is possible is real! We need to preserve for ourselves the sense for what is possible.* (My own translation.) Indeed, to ask about what is possible, is to look for a better future, is to resist those who say that there is not alternative. Real is not only what can be grasped and measured.

In that sense, according to Modehn, the defence of longings is always also a political task, to which philosophers should dedicate themselves. The philosopher Ernst Bloch, already as a young man, in 1903, shared an insight that became central to his thinking:

The longing is what has the greatest certainty in our lives. As a result, our spirit will not be forced, to simply accept the present situation as final. And in that sense every kind of criticism of what is imperfect, incomplete, unbearable already presupposes the imagination of a possible perfection, completeness, and the longing for such a possible perfection.

Our own sacred tradition is filled with stories, prayers, and songs of deep longing. The Old Testament prophets dreamed of God's Shalom and believed in the Utopian idea of a new world where there is justice and peace. The bible's prayer and hymn book, *The Psalms*, offers beautiful poetic expressions of a yearning for change, for liberation and healing. The apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans in chapter 8 talks about the deep sighs that emerge from every corner of creation, a profound longing for liberation and redemption, for the full revelation of God's grace and love.

to what can we turn

The beatitudes, Jesus' introduction to the sermon on the mount, reverberate with such longing and call us to protect and preserve it as a precious gift, a fundamental movement of our heart, a voice that should never be silenced. We sense its stirrings when we realize the

gap of imperfection. We protect it when we believe in the sufficiency of stories. We give it space when we allow ourselves to be honest about our poverty in Spirit. We celebrate it when we preserve a sense for what is possible.

And according to the poet Rainer Maria Rilke there are animals, places and habits that will not abandon us in our longing. Yes, even the night will be our faithful companion:

*Oh, to what, then, can we turn
in our need?
Not to an angel. Not to a person.
Animals, perceptive as they are,
notice that we are not really at home
in this world of ours. Perhaps there is
a particular tree we see every day on the hillside,
or a street we have walked,
or the warped loyalty of habit
that does not abandon us.*

*Oh, and night, the night, when wind
hurls the universe at our faces.
For whom is night not there?*

-Rainer Maria Rilke, from the First Duino Elegy
(translated by Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows)

And it was sufficient.
Amen.