

Sermon at Hanover International Worship, 18 August 2013

“You know what I think? No, you don’t. I think that somehow it doesn’t matter if I believe in God or not. Because: I have this Alzheimer’s, haven’t I? But God, he has got a good memory, he must have a good one, because he is God. And because God has this good, good memory I can’t vamoose completely in this Mr Alzheimer’s. That’s nice, isn’t it? To know that there is someone who remembers you.”

Hanna, 91 years old, is tossing and turning a small wooden cross in between her hands. That cross is strategically placed right at her bedside, at the bedside table next to her adjustable bed in a nursing home. The Lutheran Catechism, leather-bound and with gilt edging, has been ripped apart by Hanna in a couple of hours tedious work just the previous day, with Hanna commenting:

“Well, I guess there is no more need for all these words, words and words again. Who is supposed to understand all these words, anyway? No, no, no, no ,no, Hanna doesn’t need all these words any longer, words don’t lighten up your heart.”

Faith as setting one’s heart on something or someone based upon an act of understading – or faith as that which is heart-rending, heart-warming, assuring and comforting?

Living with the onset of dementia is confronting Hanna with quite a number of challenges:

- challenges in coping with the many demands of everyday life and everyday chores
- challenges in maintaining social relationships
- challenges in self-understanding and perception of others
- challenges in faith.

And it is confronting the church with challenges when it comes to being an inclusive church in ecclesiology, counseling and Sunday services.

Living with dementia leads to a loss of memory related to one’s own life stories and biography, but also related to stories that have had a formative impact on one’s own understanding of life, self, faith and world. Often living with dementia comes with anxieties and fears: the fear to lose intellectual capabilities and autonomy, the fear to lose the respect of relevant others and of society at large, the fear to bit by bit lose one’s own identity, and stories that used to carry in life and in faith.

I would like to place the focus of this sermon on the faith-life of people living with dementia. Entry point and access roads to faith change in the process, and faith needs different in-roads, different ways of translating the message to remain palpable, accessible and meaningful.

Sibongile Mngxitama, a member of a women prayer league in Soweto, South Africa, has been living with dementia for quite a number of years, in the later stages in a nursing home in Soweto. She described faith as 'being on a journey, insecure and yet sheltered. She said:

"And then, all of a sudden, you are on your way to Emmaus, like the disciples were. And this hole in your head that makes you forget everything, it also makes you feel so insecure, so much insecure. Afraid, yes, I am afraid. But then it is also like Emmaus. God is there. And God walks with us. And then, well then all is well. Somehow, all is well. Because you can't carry yourself through, can you? But God, God can."

The Bible describes in many stories how people have set forth. People who throughout their journeys and passages are seeking God's guidance and who clamor for a God who is there, present, accompanying and protecting. Accessible and palpable, especially when the going gets tough.

In the Emmaus story according to Luke it is the accompanying Jesus who reminds the frightened and despaired disciples that God has promised life. And here this promise of life becomes palpable and becomes real in the shared Eucharist, when life and faith, community and hope and accompaniment on the journey meet each other.

Faith is something that goes through heart, mouth and hands – 'mit Herzen, Mund und Händen', and the encounter with God encounters the whole human being.

People, living with or living without dementia, people need rituals that that open up avenues towards the realm of faith in symbolic and yet concrete ways. The Eucharist here is of specific relevance. A woman, close to her eighties, used to come up with humming sounds throughout the whole service in a nursing home. Her humming was accompanied by rhythmic beating with a spoon against her wheelchair's adjustable table. During the course of the Words of Institution for the Eucharist, the humming died down, and so did the rhythmic beating. When the wafer was given to her, she sucked on it, her face becoming calm and concentrated. "God... it's you. Mhhhhh." Continuously sucking on the wafer, her upper body started swaying to and fro and a comforting move. "Me, God, me sheep...you, you ... shepherd. Mhhhhhh."

Talking with God and communicating with God through rituals can impart the sense of home, of security in exile, of a place of belonging when everything else seems strange and uncommon. Talking with God requires a counterpart who can be fully trusted.

Sibongile consequently addressed God as 'baba', daddy. Faith is an invitation, whether we live with or without

dementia, to hope and wait for the love that grants us life in its fullness, trustingly and expectingly like children. Jesus invitation “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven” stands, as an invitation to each and everyone of us.

I once read the story of the blessing of the children during a baptism memorial service in a dementia unit of a nursing home. In the center were a small baptismal font with water, a large baptism candle and a white christening robe. While I read the story recorded in Mark 10 one of the participants in the service, an elderly women, lovingly caressed an old and battered looking doll. After finishing the reading, she held up the doll high into the air, waiting. After I had blessed the doll, the lady held the doll close to her face, waiting once more. And after I had also blessed her, she fell asleep, warmly cuddled together with the doll.

Getting in touch with God is an essential experience. It takes our whole life to be touched and transformed by God.

Faithful communication with God also depends on prayer. Prayer as a way of expressing relationship, trust, gratitude and moaning and lamentation. Prayer can take on quite a number of different forms, ranging from the set prayer that characterized childhood to monosyllabic utterances of

well-being or anger and despair, expressing immediate emotions, bringing what is right now straight to God.

In a nursing home devotion on the topic of prayer I had placed a candle, a Bible and an enlarged photocopy of Durer’s famous etching displaying hands folded in prayer on a small table in the middle of the room. After the initial hymn, one of the participants got up, circled the table a number of times and then took Durer’s etching. The etching firmly clasped in his hands, he went back to his chair, knelt down before it and started praying the Lord’s Prayer. Other participants joined him.

Talking with God sometimes requires certain prompts and a familiar atmosphere.

A message has various facets. We often tend to overemphasize the informative and intellectual aspect of it. Religious talk of people living with dementia very often has a different emphasis, i.e. the immediate relationship with a God who is present in the here and now. Approaching God is mostly done in immediate relationality, straight forward and emotional and with all the senses involved. Set prayers get connected to the immediate present, like in the Lord’s Prayer. Often during especially this prayer, the praying person visibly relaxes, and often comments are made during the Lord’s Prayer:

“Our Father... Oh yes, here you are once again, so nice to have you here... And do come, really, I mean, do come now now... I have had something to eat, thank you very much. I don't remember what it was, but that doesn't matter. As long as the stomach is nice and full. ... Oh yes, do this with your power, you know, I don't have strength any longer, do this with your power. Or come and hold me in your arms, that's also ok.”

People living with dementia are living with many challenges and fears that need verbal or bodily expressions – and many things that need room for lament. Lament as a way of relating to God like in the prayer of a 79 year old woman:

“Jessis and for God's sake, you must be kidding, God. Don't you have ears? No? And don't you have eyes? No? And what about hand, I guess you also don't have hands, do you? Forget about just chilling and hanging out up there in the clouds, no, God. Get your arse down here, right now, because then you will see what's going on here. Bullshit is going on, and big one for that matter. Jesus Christ, Jessis, do come down, man.”

Ritual, prayer, lament – they are of relevance in the relating to God as is the benediction. In each and every service the benediction marks the passage between liturgy and everyday life. The benediction concludes and opens up

at the same time – and is a palpable promise of the accompanying God. People living with dementia often indicate their wish that God's presence, God's accompaniment and support will carry them through everyday life. For example, when an 87-year old man is accosted by a nurse who is pushing his wheelchair next to him during the benediction, he said:

“There God”, pointing to his wheelchair, “there God, that's where you need to sit with me. Now and forever, forever and ever. That's where you need to sit with me. Then I hold unto you. And you. You must also hold me tight, tight. That you will do, won't you?”

Each benediction anticipates the accompanying God, each service is a feast of fools as Paul has once said. A feast of fools who trust in and relate to a God whose death and resurrection has turned the logic of this world upside down. A God who promised to make all things new.

We celebrate our services as the one body of Christ consisting of many parts. As a pilgrim community that here has no lasting city but that seeks the city to come, we are accompanied by a God who has promised:

“Even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.”
(Isaiah 46)

Hanna is waiting in the corridor of the nursing home. Her old suitcase is standing right beside her, packed with the things that are of importance to Hanna: a Teddy who has only one ear left, a key, a pair of socks, bits and pieces of the catechisms that she had torn apart, a cross. Determined to leave, Hanna takes one step, then another, another and yet another. She declares:

“Well, I’ll be off then, I am going home. Because here, there is no home here, no, no, no. At home there are mum and dad, and they love me. That’s where I belong. Home is where I can feel love. Well, here I go.”

Hanna’s bony hand takes the suitcase. Hanna turns, then catches a glimpse of the wooden cross next to the door of the dining hall. Facing the cross she announces:

“Here I go. And what about you God? Will you join me?”

And Hanna and God embark on their joint journey.

Amen

When I got to know Sibongile, she was sitting outside a Soweto nursing home, soaking in the sun and sorting little stones, heaping them from the right to the left and the left to the right. Sibongile in the process had a close look at every stone, touching it, turning it inbetween her fingertips, holding them into the light and admiring the

sunrays that imparted additional beauty on the stones. After we got acquainted with each other, Sibongile invited me to join her on the verandah. And a couple of weeks later she shared with me why the stones were of particular importance to her:

“Whoah, look at this, so many stones, so many. But they are all different, all of them. That’s nice, hey! And you know what? That’s how God made them. And God, well God knows every stone. And God loves every stone. And you know what: God does not forget any of these, no ways. That’s stunning. isn’t it?”

One day I got one of her precious stones as a present. That stone has been with me ever since, reminding me of the brilliant memory of God who does not forget what he loves.

--- Steine verteilen

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

3 For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

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