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Hannover International Worship
Eph.2:17-22 - „Overcoming boundaries“
Petri church, Kleefeld
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Ephesians 2:17-22

*17 Jesus Christ came and proclaimed peace
to you who were far off
and peace to those who were near;*

*18 for through him
both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.*

*19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens,
but you are citizens with the saints
and also members of the household of God,*

*20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,
with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.*

*21 In him the whole structure is joined together
and grows into a holy temple in the Lord;*

*22 in whom you also are being built together spiritually
into a dwelling place for God.*

A couple of months ago I witnessed a very special meal.
It was during a visit in a classroom at a secondary main school
in Hildesheim county.

At the tables next to native students
sat some boys and girls with brown skin, pitch-black hair
and extremely bright coloured clothes.

Everyone who might have passed just perfunctory
would have noticed instantly:

These guys and girls were not German, not even European.

As alien and exotic were their appearance
so is the name of their country of origin:

It is called “Myanmar”;

for some it is still better known under its old name: “Burma”.

There was something else with these foreign guests:
The upper part of their faces were covered
with darkly tinted sun glasses -
because all of them were blind.

Last summer 11 students and 5 chaperones,
some of them their teachers,
had arrived from Meiktila in Central Myanmar;
they were guests of Hildesheim Mission to the Blind.
We had invited them for a concert- and exposure tour
through Hannover and Hildesheim regions.

When we visited the classroom of the 8th grade at a main school
the German students did not know much
about the living conditions of their guests in their home country.
And probably most of you here might feel in the same way.
Maybe some of you may even ask:
Where in the world is Myanmar?
Would you be able to locate it on a global map?
If of you would be young, adventurous
and keen on exploring uncharted territories
you probably would be much better informed.
Myanmar, a country wedged between India, China and Thailand,
is just opening up to modern tourism.

For several decades
it had been under the strict rules of a military government.
This government had denied entry- and exit visas
for foreigners as well as for their own citizens.
For over 10 years this military government had even provoked
a trade boycott by diverse nations like China, Japan, the EU
and the USA, -
a unanimous reaction which is very rare in this world.
At the end the boycott caused a total economic breakdown
of all enterprises and infrastructure.
So four years ago, the government made a complete U-turn,
the military leaders cast away their uniforms
and slipped into business suits,
abandoned travel restrictions
and ushered in a new phase of democracy for the country.
The change came as a surprise
and even many people in Myanmar
were not ready to believe
whether their rulers were really sincere.

16 months ago the first free elections led to the inauguration of a new government, and against all predictions to the contrary Myanmar still prevails on its new path.

So last year – probably for the first time - a group of 11 blind and 5 sighted person got the chance to travel to Germany.

Those students at the rural main school whom I have told you about at the beginning did feel quite uneasy when they learned about the upcoming visit of blind students from Myanmar.

They wondered:

How were they supposed to communicate with their guests?

How can you talk to someone, when you cannot refer to the same language?

When you cannot use even hands and feet for your support because your partners cannot see?

What do people enjoy who belong to a completely alien culture that you had never heard about before?

But after some discussion with their teacher they came up with a whole range of amazing ideas.

The first idea:

You eat together.

They laid the table with plates, and for each plate they chose a selection of their favourite food.

On the first plate you would find some strawberries,

on the next were slices of pizza,

then a plate with chocolate bars

one more with bits of apples -

and then there was a plate

with Bavarian sausages and sweet mustard.

They invited their guests to taste from the food

and to tell them what they would liked most.

And you can imagine

how fast there was an exchange about food customs in Germany and Myanmar respective.

And if I would ask you:

Can you guess

which food was favoured most by our guests?

At another table students did some exercises
in language proficiency:

What do young people do in Myanmar
when they meet their friends?

Do they shake hands, tap the shoulder, kiss on cheeks?

How do you say "Hello" in German, or in Burmese?

After these exercises the German students had organised
a tour through the school buildings –
encouraging the guests to touch and stroke objects
along the way

It was so funny to see the group walk through the corridors
rather sideways than forwards,
while they pressed their hands against cabinet glass
and knocked on door frames.

At the end the students gathered at the auditorium
and there was music.

Each group performing on different instruments
and singing in their language.

Everyone had a wonderful time.

And although the German students felt so uneasy
at the beginning
as they weren't sure

how to communicate with their alien guests
- at the end they all felt relieved.

Especially as they now understood:
there are so many diverse ways
to communicate with one another.

It is possible to get into contact with someone
you have never met before
whose language you have not learned,
and who cannot see you.

On the other hand,
our guests from Myanmar were kind of baffled to learn,
that their German hosts treated them quite respectfully,
basically as equals,
with no disdain or pretension.

In their home country people act often quite rude with them;
even their own families regard them sometimes as a burden.

There are only very few facilities to aid the blind.

At school the teachers expel them from their classrooms -
although legally they are obligated to adhere

to the principle of inclusion.

But why should a teacher bother to care for a blind student whom he perceives to be dumb?

Some parents even hide their blind children

in the backroom of their homes /

fearful of their neighbours

who may blame them publicly for this shame.

Blinds are regarded by many as deadbeats,

whose only chance to survive

is to live as a beggar on a street.

But that is not what our guests from Myanmar have in mind

when they wonder about their options for life.

None of them wants to roam the streets as beggars.

Our guests live in a blind boarding school that bears the name:

Bawa Thit.

Bawa Thit means: New Life.

That is not only the motto of the school,

but it represents the program:

New Life –

for these children,

who get the chance to learn how to read and to write.

New Life is also the motto for adults,

who come to this school to be trained as masseuse and masseur.

As most blind adults in Myanmar

never had the chance to attend a school

they all are illiterate.

At Bawa Thit they sit in class together with the younger students

and learn braille, the tactile writing system for blind.

So they do not only get training for a job

that will ensure a secure income

and with it a certain sentiment of dignity,

they also will be equipped for greater autonomy in their lives.

And it is amazing:

Bawa Thit does not only change the lives of blinds.

Every day people from the neighbourhood come to the school

to offer volunteer work.

There is a Buddhist monastery nearby

and the monks support the school with donations

collected among their followers.

A Pastor from a Christian church

regularly comes in to help with the music program. //

So, Wherever you look in this world
you will observe a certain pattern of behaviour most of the time:
You will observe that a person
who is afflicted by an impairment like blindness
will most likely be separated, maybe even be excluded,
from normal society.

With the people from Bawa Thit
we witness quite the contrary:
It is not as difficult as it might seem at first glance
to overcome those restrictions
that separate people from one another.
And - it is worth every effort.

This is exactly the subject of today's Bible text.
Paul explains in the letter to the Ephesians:
*"Jesus Christ came and preached peace to you
who were far away
and peace to those who were near."*

Christ promises peace to every one of us.
But the thing is:
I cannot have peace on my own.
Nobody can have peace for themselves.
Only when it is shared with others,
peace can prevail in this world.

Paul had a very important reason
to emphasize this concept among his people.
The early Christian congregations
were torn apart by the divisive question,
whether non-Jewish Christians
could get the same status of membership than Jewish Christians.
The first Christians had been all Jewish,
Jesus and his disciples had been Jews
and had preached mainly to Jews.
But from the beginning
some not-Jewish listeners were also drawn to the Gospel.

For Jews it was forbidden
to have close contact with people from abroad.
They even were not allowed to touch them
or to invite them into their homes.
What was most important,
Jews were not allowed to eat together with gentiles.

This became the main obstacle for a joint celebration of Holy Communion in the early Christian community.

Paul therefore urgently explains:

“Jesus Christ has made both Jews and Gentiles into one ... that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace.”

When we today look back to this early dispute, the controversy might seem to us quite petty. But unfortunately since these times divisions, condemnations and persecutions have again and again done their destructive work among people.

On the other hand, there are so many opportunities available today for interchange and understanding. Like: When a group of blind students from remote Myanmar starts to communicate with students from a German regular school in a rural county. I may be separated from others through my language, the colour of my skin, by history and tradition. And sometimes people who share all these faculties are even more isolated through physical conditions like a disability of blindness. But let's not tire to overcome these limits and boundaries. Instead - we are to organize opportunities for interchange and exposure. We are to be creative to invent more instances for encounters and venues for communication. Let's be confident, that all those who are engaged in these kind of activities will bring some peace into this world. And let's be faithful, that we have all the means ready at hand; that God has given us so many gifts and resources for this specific task; because God has given this promise that encompasses the whole world, a really extraordinary promise:

17 Jesus Christ came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near;

*18 for through him
both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.*

*19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens,
but you are citizens with the saints
and also members of the household of God.*

For God a category like „stranger“ or „alien“ does not exist.
We all are members of this one household,
that is, God’s household.

And for this I can only say:

Thank you, Lord!

Thank you, for this special gift of oneness.

Thank you for all the capacities, skills
and sometimes even genius

given to us, provided for us

to achieve this one purpose:

to have peace and oneness among people.

Thank you; lord,

for your gift of grace.

Without it-

what a destitute place our world would be.

Amen