

„Drawing breath from eternity“- the power of prayer

Dear sisters and brothers,

first of all I would like to wish you all a „Happy New Year“. A new year always marks a beginning with new hopes, new expectations, new goals and challenges.

A friend once compared a new year with a dark tunnel that you enter. You can't see where the path will lead you and what you wish for most is a torch or any kind of light to see where you are going. Are we aware that we have a companion at our side who is taking us by our hand and leading us through... who doesn't let go, no matter how many obstacles and hindrances come our way? Is God not the best light that we can wish for, to lead us on uncertain paths.

Looking at that image of a stony road and God as a faithful companion at our side, we have to ask ourselves whether we really call on him to walk with us. Do we allow him to take our hands, to walk beside us, to support us and comfort us? Are we walking into this new year in prayer?

I took time to reflect on my way of praying and would like to invite you to do the same today.

Around Christmas I read a very good newspaper article that talked about the power of prayer and how prayer is a basis of any faith that is used even by people who don't consider themselves believers. Prayer is one of the first expressions of faith that we are confronted with as a child and maybe the last expression of our own faith that we use before we die. There are countless situations in which prayer is used:

- the evening prayer of a girl spoken together with her grandmom
- the quick prayer of a soccer player before he takes a penalty kick
- the silent prayers of so many travellers before the plane takes off and a thank you prayer expressed by clapping hands when the plane lands safely
- the desperate prayer of a school child who hasn't learned his or her vocabulary

Even people who don't consider themselves faithful Christians can be seen with folded hands and their faces turned up to heaven in many moments of their lives. I love the idea that prayer is a free gift from God that can be used by everybody and in which anybody can find relief. In our religion there are no rules about how to pray or how often we have to speak to God... Nor is there a regulation about who is allowed to pray or a condition that says: Only those people who go to church regularly or live according to the 10 commandments have the right to pray.

Prayer is free. Prayer has so many different shapes and words, gestures and rituals. You can pray at any given place, at any given time. Where else can we find that much freedom?

The odd thing about freedom is that it can be ever so healing, uplifting, liberating... if we know how to use it and are courageous enough to use all the possibilities that we have.

But sometimes freedom can also make us helpless because we need to find our own way of doing something, instead of following the example of others. How often do people use „finished“ prayers instead of praying freely, because they need a pattern and the right words for the cause.

I remember one day in confirmation class where I was asked to write a prayer to start off the day. I was absolutely frightened because I didn't know how to pray. I knew some prayers that you say before meal times and a prayer that we had to learn by heart in Sunday School... some morning prayers that we read out loud in religion class and the Lord's prayer which I could say in two languages. But a prayer in my own words? Talking to God in my own words? I couldn't do it. I felt ever so vulnerable and insecure for the longest time and even during my time of lay preaching I found it the most difficult task to pray out loud in front of the congregation. Somehow I had the feeling I had to find the most beautiful words, the strongest images, uplifting messages and the correct grammar phrases to speak to God and bring before him my own needs and the needs of the people around me.

I found praying very challenging. Not only because the right words didn't come to my mind but also because there were times in which I didn't receive any answer from God. Or maybe I didn't even expect an answer from him anymore. Maybe I was so desperate that I didn't even know what to ask for or so exhausted that I didn't take the time or effort to sit down and pray. I guess every one of us has experienced times in which our praying habits changed because there was just no hope, no strength, no faith or no words left. Maybe we stopped praying because we would have had to allow ourselves to keep still for a moment... allow all the thoughts and fears to arise that we trying to ban by keeping busy all day long.

There are countless reasons not to pray. But even more reasons to do so. Don't we often lose the strength to pray in times when we desperately need God at our side?

But how can we pray? How can we be close to God in those times of wordless pain and exhaustion?

The truth is that we need nothing more than the desire to come before God with our pain and helplessness. No words. No concrete wishes. No solutions. Not even the faith or the hope that something will change.

While I was preparing this sermon I came across an expression for prayer that I fell in love with immediately: Atem holen in der Ewigkeit „Drawing breath from eternity“. It was used in connection with a nun who was asked how she managed to pray so often every day. She answered that for her prayer was „being still before God“... simply spending time with God no matter whether she talked to him, whether she met him silently, whether she was cross with him and lamented to him or whether she let her heart speak while tears rolled down her cheeks.

Praying is „drawing breath from eternity“ before the chaos of every day life becomes important again.

I just love that image and have tried it out a few times since I heard it. On my first day of school after the vacation my hyperactive student was banging his head, his pencil case, his feet, his ruler, his schoolbag, his slippers and his hands against everything he could find for four hours. It was enough to drive me crazy. After two hours I was ready to throw him out of the window and decided to leave the classroom for just a minute. I just stood on the hallway, asked God for patience and

peace and drew a deep breath from God's strength before I re-entered the classroom. Nothing in this child's behaviour changed but I felt calmer, more capable of dealing with this difficult situation than before. And I decided to draw more breaths from eternity every day... not only when dealing with this hyper kid. Maybe you want to try it out too...

- when your baby is screaming and howling and just doesn't stop
 - when you're stuck in a fight or an argument that makes your heart race and your head throb
 - when you feel exhaustion tearing you down after a long day and many demanding tasks that you don't feel fit to do
 - when you are sitting in a hospital or a doctor's office waiting for a diagnosis or worrying about a person you love
 - when your teenager is acting up like a person you don't know and don't understand and your patience just reaches its limit...
- DRAW A DEEP BREATH FROM ETERNITY

Turn to God and rely on his peace, his presence and his support in these times of anger, of fear and helplessness. Throw all your words and emotions at him, if you can. Or simply search for him in silence. He will be there as it was promised to us in Matthew 7:

***„Ask and it will be given to you.
Search and you will find.
Knock and the door will be opened."***

...

People of all times and in all kinds of places have knocked on God's door for help. When praying I feel like being part of a community, somewhat like the community we have when we share bread and wine. I like the idea that so many Bible characters used the power of prayer to overcome challenges and crises. Just think of Hannah in our old testament reading for today. A woman praying to God, asking for a baby. How many women throughout the centuries have followed her example and how many of us have prayed that prayer, too. Or Jairus putting all his hopes in Jesus and God to heal his sick child. What words might he have used for his unspoken prayers? And how many people around the world put the same hopes in God right now? All these women and men, in their silent prayers and their anxious cries are united with us here today. In our uncertainties, in our fears, in our hopes and needs, in our thinking and praying. I find it a very uplifting image that people all over the world are praying to God in this minute and find comfort in his presence.

„Asking, searching, knocking..." in other words „praying" is something we can truly learn from children.

„I want an ice-cream! Buy me a racing- car! Read me a book! Why do I have to wash the dishes?- It's so unfair! I want you to come! I want you to sleep in my bed! Get me some orange juice!"

Children to a lot of knocking and asking every day. And we as parents, grandparents and teachers are the ones who want to make them happy and give them everything they need for life. But is it always possible? Don't we sometimes have to say: „Sorry, kid, you can't have what you're asking for now!“. The second part of our Matthew reading compares our parenting to God's way of being a father to us:

„If you, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your father in heaven give good things to those who ask him.“

Without this passage, the whole promise of asking and being given, searching and finding, knocking and entering an open door would lack an important element. It compares the responsibility that parents have to those that God has for his people. Parents know that their children will be challenged throughout their lives, that they will have to learn some things the hard way- whether they want them to or not. Maybe the most difficult task of being a parent, a grand-parent, a god-parent or a teacher is accepting the fact that we can only accompany our children on their path. Listen to them. Attend to them. Be near to them. Hold them. Support them. We can't live their lives for them or make decisions for them. They need to meet the questions of life on their own and grow into the answers. All we can do is be there for them whenever they need us. And that is difficult enough.

And God's love works similarly. It's unique because God has so many children to attend to. Because his love is much more forgiving than that of a normal parent could be. God's love is powerful, full of miracles and grace.

And yet we have to accept that despite his love our lives will be painful and unfair at times. God won't be able to protect us from sickness, heartache, times of loneliness and despair- no matter how hard we pray. We might not be blessed with a baby- even though we prayed as hard as Hannah did. And our child might not be healed despite of all our faith.

And yet, although it looks like he has deserted us, he is standing at the door, waiting for us to knock. And although it looks as if there is nothing he can do for us, we do receive from him, when we call on him. May we never forget that it is God we are turning to. We are allowed to believe in miracles. We can hope on his power, his healing and love. And we should trust him and his answers. They may not exactly be what we are asking for but surely we receive his promise that he is walking with us. And if we allow God to accompany us, we will – with his help- change our way of asking, of knocking and praying and thus our way of accepting the life that he has given us.

I would like to share a short anecdote with you that accompanied me through the Christmas season. The brother-in-law of a very good friend of mine was diagnosed with a brain tumor a little more than a year ago. He died on the first day of Christmas, 2009 at the age of 50. My friend's husband is a very strong believer and took much strength from God during the last year. When I spoke to him about his brother's death and his feelings connected to it, he said: „I am very sad but I'm not bitter because in the end it happened the way I prayed for it to happen.“ I was a little puzzled at first and he explained this sentence to me. „See, Caro, in the beginning I prayed for a miracle to happen. I prayed day and night for good doctors,

for medicine that could heal my brother and for new methods that could stop the growth of the tumor. It gave me hope to carry on.

Then came a point where the doctors clearly said that my brother wouldn't survive this disease. They made it clear to all of us that we would have to accept this truth and make the best of the time we had together. For some weeks I was bitter and angry, unable to pray. But this paralyzed me. So I slowly started to pray again. I prayed that he would live a long time yet. That we would be able to spend his birthday and Christmas and the spring and the summer together yet. And I prayed for myself: That I would learn to accept this truth. Some time passed in which I had more or less hope. But then came the last stage of this sickness. My brother lost his sense of humour, he lost his appetite, he lost his strength and his interest. He just lay there and wished that the days would pass quickly. And I no longer prayed that he would live a long while yet. I was at the point where I wanted him to die in peace. And I prayed that we could be with him when he died and he would know that we love him and yet would survive without him. And on the first day of Christmas all of his family came together to spend the day with him. Even all his nieces and nephews who are spread around the whole world were there. Each of us spoke to him, spent time with him and in a way said good-bye... and then he died peacefully. My prayer was heard. During that last year of suffering I felt God's presence more than ever before. He was there because I really needed him.

After Johannes shared this story with me, I understood that praying is a process that changes your way of living, of thinking and accepting. That anger, disbelief and disappointment are part of that process. And that prayer can be the whole variety of what we have heard of today reaching from the last-minute prayer to save us from embarrassing consequences to the life-long prayer that accompanies us through many stages of our lives.

For the new year to come I wish you many prayers. I hope that you might have the strength to pray- even in difficult situations. And even more I wish that your lives may be happy and light and your prayers short phases of drawing breath in eternity. I pray that all of us might feel God's hand holding ours, his peace surrounding us and his light guiding us on even or stony roads.

May your prayers be blessed. Have a prayful new year!

Amen.