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«IN THE EYE OF THE STORM»

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Prayer:

You Lord, are in this place. Your presence fills it.

Lord, help us to relax. Take from us the tension that makes peace impossible. Take from me the fears that do not allow me to venture. Take from me the worries that blind my sight. Take from me the distress that hides your joy.

Help us to know that we are with you. That we are in your care, that we are in your love.

In you we live and move. In you we have our being. We are in your love.

Amen

INNER STORMS

We will still be in the storm, and we hope we will find the eye also today!

Yesterday we focused on storms outer storms. Often are these storms of a kind that is visible for the people around us. Storms that comes from the outside is not easy to hide. Death, accidents, being treated bad etc will be often be known by family and friends and even strangers. Then they are in a position to try to give us support and comfort through the storm.

Today we will focus more on inner storms, the storms that rises inside of us. Of course, storms that arise outside will usually also rise inner-storms and storms related to faith. However, sometimes our inner self is in a storm that is invisible for our surroundings, - if we do not tell them.

INNER STORMS

What are inner-storms about?

Of course there can be many different-things, but I will here mention a few:

Something I have done that I could not imagination that I could do; Betrayed someone, harmed some-one, ben unfaithful. It ca be about depression, anxiety, a difficult choice or decision that has to be taken, overwhelmed by feelings I can not handle etc

Exercise: 2 min to remember or recognize an inner storm in your life

WHEN LIFE IS BURSTING YOUR SELF-IMAGE – A CHALLENGE FOR YOUR FAITH

I have met people, and I have been there myself, to ask: “Who am I when I realize that I am not the one I thought I was?”

Many of us who have a Christian faith have been fed with a message from early childhood that God wants us to be smiling, obedient to him, our parents and all others authorities. That we are supposed to help and love others, - and to love them more than ourselves. If we do not fulfill these rules then God will be sad, disappointed in us or even worse, - he will be angry and punish us. I think this was a way of bringing up children that hopefully not have continued. But for some generations- included mine- this was very common. The songs we sang also reflected this: “Be careful little foot where you go, be careful little eye what you see and so on because our father in heaven is looking down to us on earth so be careful.... “

As I said yesterday. You can often carry with you the imagination that if we fulfill our part by keeping the rules we are protected.

Many of us can manage for a long time to live up to these ideal pictures. But sooner or later most of us will have experienced a change of the image we have of ourselves. This might come all of a sudden or as a consequence of a slow developing process:

I do something I thought I would never do, I react with emotions I shouldn't have, I am being let down; I let others down. **The angels don't carry me anymore!**

I give you some example: A clergyman finds himself deeply involved in a relationship with a married woman or a mother who loves her child beats it in fury one day she feels exhausted. Or we can recognize that we have a strong need for power, to control other people. The shadow can have many different faces.

Meeting the shadow

To meet the shadow or the dark place in me or to see my own sin – It is all about losing the illusion of myself! The discovery of my own dark sides might be frightening and can feel like impossible to deal with. How can I be me when I am also all this awful things?! What do God think of me now?! Has he abandoned me or will he abandon me?! **This can throw us into a really rough inner storm!**

The confusion and the anxiety about who I am can be devastating. Many people get depressed when they face the dark shadow in themselves.

I will give you an example. This is a poem written by Aslaug Sæland. She is a disabled woman who studied theology and became a priest as an adult. She gives word to the experience of being in the storm of not knowing if you can be the person you discover in the dark corners of yourselves.

SWEARING

Never has so much crap been inside of me
At least I have never known
I think God is only dirt
The worst swearing-words, words I've never thought before, are coming loudly out of my mouth, - carried by my voice
Is this the same girl that used to go to the children's club?
Who embroidered tablecloths to get money for the mission?
The one that heard about the poor heathens and prayed for them to be converted to Jesus?
I curse the day I was given life and the one who gave it to me
I rage about God and saliva is flowing, my face gets red
Is this the same girl who testified in the church when she was fifteen?
And told how good it was to belong to Jesus?
It is not good now, that's for sure.
Which one is the real me?
Are the happy fifteen-year-old witness and the thirty-six-year-old child both God's own little girl?

What can be in the eye of this storm?

If we dare to seek the calm place and face all this, and let God face it, important things can happen. I think we have to learn how to integrate, acknowledge and accept the shadow. We need to integrate the negative within ourselves and not fly from it. If our self-image is based only on our good sides it's easy to be pushed into storms. But if we stand in the eye we can be helped to integrate the shadow and be able to handle the tension.

In this very tension, as frightening and painful it might be, lies the seed to a new and truer life. To take up everything about oneself, for better or worse, is a great task. But the one who is able to receive oneself as the one he or she really is, and gradually gets the experience that God also will do so, obtains a reception and a foundation much more profound than the one who only feels loved when managing to hide everything that isn't "what it ought to be." Else our identity will always be threatened.

If the shadow is not acknowledged, we very easily project it onto others. As Jesus says: "you see the splinter in our brothers eye, but not the beam in our own." Or we can be a victim of our own shadow. An example of this I think we, inter alia, find in the sexual abuse cases in

the Catholic Church. What we do not know can be a problem; we do not protect us against. Or as Gordon Johnson, the founder of Modum Bad, a well known psychiatric institution in Norway, used to say: "What we are aware of we can do something about. What we are not aware of does something to us."

To know the center of the storm about self-image

Knowledge about humanity's dark sides is important when dealing with people that have experienced that their self-image is destroyed. How can we show them the center of this storm and help them integrate what has become so unbearable? For some it will be a struggle about suppression, or a storm that leads them away from faith. Some have a reaction of depression and anxiety. Confusion and disorganization might also result. Who am I now?

It is important that we, who are supposed to help, have been in the eye of this storm ourselves, that we have met our own dark sides. It is easy to think, when we hear other peoples life-story's that: "I could never have done that!" Well, I will ask you to think again on a deeper level. If the circumstances had been different: "Couldn't I?" It is difficult to only have theoretical knowledge about this issue. Only by having acknowledged the pain and the fear, oneself is it possible to sense what it is all about for the other person.

Only by having knowledge of one's own inner landscape is it possible to risk going into another person's without both getting lost on the way to the center.

Only by knowing my own dark sides is it possible to meet others without fear or even disgust! It is also important to remember that letting the glossy picture of oneself go, always will involve a feeling of loss. Loss has to be mourned before it is possible to carry on. Like in the storm that arises around us – it is common to meet a strong wish that everything shall be "like before."

To know our darkest sides and get in touch with our deepest wounds can lead us to despair. But when we reach the eye, or the haven, we can experience the grace of listening to the voice of Jesus from the gospel of John. 8.11. "Neither do I condemn you." And he reminds us that he came to heal the broken ones and restore them with his everlasting love. It is because he knows all about dark sides, shadows, hurts and sin that he came.

And like in the outer storms God often send people to be a center, a calm haven, to comfort and guide us. Sometimes we are the one he chose to be this person.

THE STORMS OF GUILT AND SHAME

Sometimes inner storms arise because of the feeling of guilt and the feeling of shame. The church has through the ages been better dealing with guilt than with shame. It can be important to recognize the difference between this two.

Guilt

Guilt is connected to something I have done. I have done something wrong. Because I can take responsibility for what I have done it is possible to settle. I can ask another person to forgive me for what I have done. And I can ask God of forgiveness. We have the option to confess and receive forgiveness.

In the storm it can be difficult to recognize the different between these feelings. But if someone suffers from having done something wrong and confess and receive forgiveness and they still feel as guilty as they did before, than it is often about shame.

Shame

Shame is connected to who I am, and can therefore not be settled in the same way as guilt. There is often a feeling of being “not worthy” in front of Gods eyes and other people eyes. God’s absence is experienced as being reasonable and irrevocable. There will be a strong feeling of not being worth loving. Shame is the feeling of “being” a mistake.

Guilt is “I have made a mistake” and shame is “I am a mistake.”

Confession can even make things worse. Now do also other people know what a bad person he or she is.

To deal with shame in our own life or others you have to know that shame has to be spoken. Shame can’t survive empathy! A person who suffers from shame need to be met by acceptance. In the storm of shame we can rest in the eye of the blessing. The Aaronic blessing is really, what we need to hear in the storm of guilt and especially shame! Listen to this:

The Lord bless you and keep you
The Lord make his face shine upon you
And be gracious to you
The Lord lift up his countenance upon you
And give you peace.

This blessing is also a symbol for the most profound needs we have as infants. We need the parents face to shine upon us if shall grow up as individuals that think we are worth love and thrust and who is able to love and thrust others. If we have had shining faces watching over us we will also be better prepared for all kinds of storms and it will be easier for us to recognize the shining face of God. We will be more resilient.

Jesus often surrounded himself with people who felt shame. They were even ostracized from the society. They were attacked by leprosy and bleedings that made them unclean. It was prostitutes, tax officials and all kind of sinners. Like we are. But it was never the people who carried shame that Jesus criticized. It was always those who thought about themselves that they were better than others.

Feelings

Some storms are storms of feelings! For many Christians feelings can be a burden. Some think feelings are something you rather shouldn't have. But if you have, - at least it need to be the correct feelings. One can have too many, too few or wrong feelings. In some traditions the focus is on the feelings you always should have, like joy, peace and strength. In other traditions is more focus on the feelings you should not have. Feelings can be almost forbidden like: aggression, sexuality, envy etc.

In some connections The Word of God, and prayer, are being preached as actions against "wrong" or "lacking" feelings.

In the spiritual guiding tradition we learn to see feelings as something neutrally. We are born with a set of feelings. From the psychology we learn that we have 9 basic feeling from birth. The feelings are looked upon as information. They tells us what is really going on inside of me know. They can guide us into our deepest and most profound places. Places we often try to hide even from ourselves. These places can raise storms if they suddenly show us they are there. These places need to be visited by us and by God. God knows us already. And we need to know ourselves.

Feelings are deeply connected with the experience of being alive. Our feelings are also deeply related to our identity. They tell us who we are.

By asking what a particular feeling wants to tell us we can find important stuff from our life-history that has have an impact on us that we are not aware of. Some of us have been hurt and neglected or betrayed. We can be afraid to think about this. Maybe we can't bear the feelings? Then we will never be able to work through what happened and move forward. Maybe we need to forgive or maybe we need to stand up for ourselves. Many Christians neglect their feelings and themselves.

How can this happen?! We have an incarnated God. He cried, he was angry, he cried, he got tired. He was a man who showed his feelings. Why can't we? What we don't feel we can't heal!

Can't separate feelings, thoughts or actions

Many Christians don't separate what they feel and what they actually do. They might judge themselves equally hard for a feeling or a thought, as if it were an action. This can be very hard for the self-image. The Bible is full of people calling for revenge. Like in Psalm 94.1. It comforts them to believe there will be a day for judgement and that the revenge belongs to God. It should comfort us to see that God understands these feelings. We can give them to God. And Jesus is the one who is to judge us all in the end. That should comfort us even more. For some people being in the storm of wanting revenge and to fight back it can be like an eye in the storm to meet God as the one who support and understand. The one we can speak honestly about everything to.

A strict and fragile God

Sometimes our inner storms can be so overwhelming that we think God can't take everything that is me and my life. If my imagination of God is that he is very strict and fragile can my life-experience be that my inner life is too much for him to bear. Then God has become the watchman of morality who has built small claustrophobic life-rooms for us. Outside this room everything is dangerous and illegal. The church has sometimes reinforced this image. Many of us will be afraid that we can't fit in. I will read this poem written by Bente Bratlund. I think she gives word to an experience of being more than God can take:

If you can accept me

If you can accept me like this

Rebellious

Headstrong

Bleeding

If you can accept me like this

My scrubland

My darkness

My light

I ask you

Can you accept me?

When the inner storm rages some of us gets an additional burden: some of us, grown up in a protestant tradition, seem to believe that God is not very interested in our inner life. He has more important things to worry about. Some of us feels like the only important thing is to be workers in Gods vineyard. Because of that many of us try to ignore our feelings and our inner storms as long as possible. This can lead to burn-out, depression and anxiety.

But we do not find any support in the Bible about this broad skepticism to our inner life. The Bible gives attention to all kind of inner states. And God is the creator, not only of our body's but also of this rich and complicated inner life! Psalm 139: "For you created my inmost

being.” Proverb 4.23 : “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life” And Jesus says in The gospel of John 14.20..I am in my Father, and you are in me and I am in you.”

Like Henry Nouwen, the well-known writer says it:” My heart is the place where God has chosen to stay.” Should we not then dare to believe that our innermost self is important to God? Not only as a place he oversee; But as a place where growth, truth, deeper understanding and healing can take place?

In the Old Testament it seems like the people of God thrust God's interests in all our feeling. They are not hiding anything for him and they have a kind of curiosity to examine what the feelings will tell them. Listen to David in Psalms 43.5: “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?” The people in the Old testament expect God to relate to their outer and inner storms. They almost demand him to do so. Listen to this:

Psalm

4.1.”Answer me when I call to you,”

5.1 Give ear to my words Lord”

10.1: Why O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?”

13.1-3 “How long Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face for me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? ”

16.1 “Keep me safe O God, for in you I take refuge” 74.22:”Rise up O God and defend your cause.”

Unconditional and eternal love

There is nothing I can experience in my life that can throw me out of the hand of God, not the hardest storms, absolutely nothing! When my life is a mess and nothing seems to be thrust-worthy - I surrender to the God who will stand by -me whatever I have to go through:

Rom.8.35:”Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

Here is no imagination of escaping the storms or all kinds of trouble. The one and only thing we can surrender to is that no kind of trouble can separate us from the love of Christ. It makes a difference! Christ is not always offering us rescue, but he is always offering us his loving friendship. A friendship like no other. He may not fulfill all our wishes, but he fulfills all his promises about loving us into eternity.

That God loves us under all circumstances can be challenging for us to believe. Maybe we can believe it when we are showing up from our best side?! But when the inner storms of guilt, shame, not being good enough, not working hard enough etc rides us then it can be difficult to believe it is true. And we often think that God has to wait until till the storm is over, until I have cleaned up this outer or inner mess, until I am able to solve this problem

and all kind of things that disturbs my life. It can make us take a break in the relationship with God, before we can invite him into our lives again. But God is always in the storm and he is the eye of it. He is not waiting in the eye or on the outside. The eye is there because we need a break so that we can focus.

The most characteristic for a mature faith is that we dare to believe that Gods love is unconditional. It has to be experienced to be believed. That is a kind of experience we sometimes only can get in storms.

Be there, want him, listen to him, Let him

As in outer, so in inner storms; always keep the conversation alive! Seek silence, seek undisturbed places. Be present in front of him who is always, and everywhere, present.

Let yourself want him! As in Psalm 42: "My soul thirst for God, for the living God. My tears have been my food day and night!" Ask yourself: "What do I want from right him?" The guide to life? The counselor? The comforter? The healer? I think God ask all of us the same question that he asks Mary when she seeks him by the open grave: "Why are you crying? Whom do you seek?" We knock at the door, but we are always already wanted.

How can we listen to him? Sometimes we scream so loud that we cannot hear anyone else speaking. In the tradition of Spiritual direction are the words of the Bible the plays where Jesus can meet each of us individually. Through the same old words, written for many, Jesus voice can reach into our most hidden places.

Words that feels so personally spoken that it is like I meet him today. This is My Jesus talking to ME. It can be life-changing, comforting, challenging, and life-giving, - and often exactly what we need to carry on a little bit longer.

But how can we know this is from God? Jesus says we shall know him by his voice. His voice, according to the tradition, always brings consolation. You will have more hope and more courage!

In this tradition is the necessity of being very honest, coming without veil, to speak from the place you find yourself important if you really want to let him do his work with you. It is not as easy as we often think to be this naked. It takes spiritual courage! Only when you dare to be unprotected and uncovered, - than you let him. You allow him to take care of what you really need: That he dry your tears, that he wash your feet, that he nourish you with his love, that he talks to the storms in your life.

Exercise: The surrender

Compassion and the ability to support ourselves

When storms hit us we can need to meet Jesus in the eye. Sometimes Jesus sends other people to meet us. They can remind us of his presence and sometimes they can even

represent him. But if other people shall know that you need them you have to tell them! Often we try to hide for our friends and family that we are going through hard times. We may not want them to be worried or we want to protect ourselves from the truth about our life. Jesus is almost always surrounded by his friends. He even invites them to share his hardest storm in the garden of Gethsemane. He, the son of God was not ashamed to show his tears and his anxiety – and his need for them to be there. Sometimes I think he has given us to each other to be his comforting voice and resting places in the storms. So let other people be there.

But we are also given to ourselves. But are we really supporting ourselves when the storm comes. Some of us can be really hard against ourselves. Giving ourselves messages like:” you always get into trouble”. “Nobody act as helpless in these situations as you do!”

Many of us have never learned self-compassion. What is that?

It can be defined like this: “Being touched by and open to one`s own suffering, not avoiding or disconnecting to it, generating the desire to alleviate one`s own suffering and to heal oneself with kindness.”

In our culture self-criticism can be a hinder for our self-compassion. Many of us have been raised by criticism and if we are we will take over the criticism against ourselves as adults. Research on this issue find that especially among women self-criticism is widespread.

Both our own self-criticism and sometimes different kinds of theology can hinder us from doing what is necessary to help ourselves in the storm.

Many Christians have been told that pride is the primary sin. But, as a famous Christian psychologist Carl Rogers says:” If I were to search for the central core of difficulty in people as I have come to know them, what is that in the great majority of cases they despise themselves, regard themselves as worthless and unlovable.” And as therapist often find, when you find pride it is often a cover-up for far deeper feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness. Pride again is not the central problem.

Theology, insofar that it focuses on the sin of pride, can easily neglects women`s experience of life. Many woman have low-self-esteem, they are used to identify others needs and some are almost drowning in their relationships. They take care of family, friends, colloquies, church-members etc. Many woman often have little focus on themselves and their own needs because that would be selfish. Some theology can be preached in ways that hinders woman in taking responsibility for their own life, by suggesting that self-assertion and the struggle for self-definition are sins.

Then, - You can be in a storm. Doing more than you possible can and you think you are not allowed to help yourself out. Theology that hinders people to rise and show the world who they are has not only affected woman. We know that also race, social class, disability and a

lot of other things have suppressed people. The mental slavery can be so strong, that even if it is disruptive, you think you have to be in the storm and that the eye, or the way out, is not for you. Unfortunately I must leave this issue here. But since most of the preaching during the centuries has been given by men, and often man with power, we need to be aware of how that has influenced on theological issues and definitions.

And we need to keep up with the changing of times. The Bibles Paul did obviously never imagine that someone could not love their own body. Today is self-harm, eating-disorders, and body-shame a storm many young people struggle in. New problem needs new solutions. And we need to be aware of the problems and the storms of our time.

According to the shame-researcher Breneè Brown one of the things we are threatened by in our time is to try to be anybody else than who we are. Because we think we are not good enough: She says: "Staying real is one of the most courageous battles that we will ever fight!" It is about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to let our true self be seen.

It fits precisely to Wilfred Stinissen, a well-I known Swedish writer and spiritual guide says, about the core of the deep inner prayer:

"To pray is to stop being someone else than who you really are, to stop living next to your true self." The Lord has created us like he wanted us to be, But for some of us it is hard to receive ourselves as a gift.

So what can we do to help ourselves in the storm? We have to listen to what we say to ourselves and we have to try to speak kindly. Be aware of what I feel. Tell ourselves it awful that you have to go through this. Tell yourselves you will be there for you.

When you are in your private storm you often feel hopeless and divided from others. But remain yourselves that what you feel is a very deeply shared human experience. This is what it feels being a part of humanity.

But how do I receive myself as part of the humanity? If I am supposed to receive every human being as if he or she was Christ himself, - am I not supposed to meet my own inner self in the same way?

If Jesus loves us so much that he gave our lives for us don`t we owe him to share his love, - also for us? Only when love is received it can be given. Jesus loves us – and the only question he asks us who is standing of the tradition of the church is: Do you love me?!

Jesus question is never about my strength, my deeds, my intellect or good works. Jesus question is: "Do you love me?"

Love is the center, the eye of the storm. And with these lines I think Paul tells the core in the gospel in a very trustworthy and beautiful way. These are words to remember when storms rage:

Rom.8.38:”For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”