

Grindel service for the beginning of the year - Hamburg 07.01.2023

"You are a God who sees me."

Genesis 16:13

I wish you a happy new year 2023. I hope you all arrived in the new year safe and healthy!

Today is going to be a bit more personal than usual, I'm a bit excited so I'll probably read more than usual. I'll try at least, because it's really hard for me not to speak freely. I would like to thank you in advance for your trust and for your trust over the past few years, and I would be happy if this trust grew even more today. Perhaps some will have many questions after this sermon. For me or about the topic.

The Adventist Church in Germany's motto for the year 2023, "You are God who sees me," from Genesis 16:13, speaks deeply to me personally and also tells my story in a different way.

Allow me to stay with Hagar for a moment.

Hagar is "only" a maid. Back then you didn't have many rights as a servant. As a woman and as a maid even less. One was dependent on the favor of the Master or the Lady in charge. As they saw you, so they treated you. If you of use to them, they saw more value in you and if not, many saw little or nothing of value in you. At that time, due to the power imbalance, even majorities could become minorities. It was difficult to really be seen. To be really seen and not despised, marginalized and judged. Free from expectations of having to be someone else. At least that's how it seems to me, looking at this world from the 21st century.

Hagar was supposed to solve Abram and Sarai's problem of childlessness by fathering a child with Abram for Sarai. It worked and Sarai now feared for her status as Ms. Abrams. When she approaches her husband with her concerns, he withdraws from the affair by telling his wife, do whatever you want with Hagar, after all she is your maid. With this free pass, Sarai started bullying Hagar so much that she was forced to flee.

As she was fleeing, an angel of God found her and asked Hagar: Where are you from and where are you going? Two deep questions. Two questions about identity.

When Hagar tells the angel that she has fled from her mistress Sarai, he tells her to go back to her and submit to her again.

What a blatant request. Be subordinate again? Put up with everything? But it doesn't stop with these words of the angel. He goes on to say to Hagar:

"I will give you more offspring than you can count. You will have a son. Call him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard your cries for help. Your son will be untamed like a wild donkey! He will fight everyone and all will be against him. Yes, he will live in strife with all his brethren.' Then Hagar called the LORD who had spoken to her El-Roi. "You are a God who sees me." For she said: "I have seen him who sees me!"

The same God who had promised Abram countless offspring now promised them to Hagar as well. He did not oppose them or Abram and Sarai. Today we would have a big debate about surrogacy. Abram, Sarai, and Hagar would definitely have faced the parish council or an ethics committee. What happened there contradicts our official understanding of marriage and partnership. "But God is a God who sees me", Hagar confesses and realizes that God's view is different from our view.

God promises all three blessings and many offspring. Hagar now has the same advocate as Abram and Sarai.

Hagar needed a safe place. Without this advocate. If it weren't for the God who sees her, she probably wouldn't have returned.

I also need a safe place and don't know if I have one.

It's easy to generalize and speak of an unknown group. A group of people without faces.

That's why I want to speak about myself today and give a face to a group of people.

That's why it's good that this sermon is streamed and can be looked up at any time.

Because I want to give a voice to everyone who has been silent so far; those who didn't have space to be open, to talk about it. As a pastor, it has always been important to me that we as a church are a safe place that values freedom and diversity, and it was always clear to me that one day there would

come a time when I would like to tell you this because it is important to me that you really know and see me.

It's important for me to say at this point that just because I didn't tell everyone everything doesn't mean I wasn't honest. Sometimes it takes courage to be honest and sometimes it just takes a safe place.

"You are a God who sees me." I could always be open with him. Now I want to entrust you with something very important to me.

I'm bisexual. That means I can fall in love with both women and men. I have known this since I was 14 years old. I knew this when I was 16 years old and was baptized. I knew it when I wanted to be a police officer, and when I gave up my dream job to be a pastor. It was clear to me from the start that if I wanted to become or remain a pastor, I couldn't talk about it. That that would be impossible. So I studied theology without being able to talk about it with other Christians. I became a pastor and kept it to myself for 13 years. As a bisexual person, you are a suspect species in both worlds (hetero and homo). Many homosexuals are of the opinion that one just does not know yet that one is not bi but actually homosexual and many Christians are convinced that one can be freed from a "wrong" sexual orientation with Jesus' help. That's why so few queer people are open about their identity. Clear theological positions are formulated in sermons from the pulpit. Few pastors have the courage to speak up when they disagree with official theology.

"You are a God who sees me"

It is extremely important to me that no matter how a person believes or what concerns a person has, everyone is welcome with us. Because every person is loved by God.

I am thankful that after many years of struggle I have understood that my being is not a sin, because we cannot choose our sexual orientation and identity.

Even if this raises many questions that I cannot and do not want to go into today, we as the Grindel church community, will be dealing with this topic in the coming weeks in worship services and study times. I've been told before that I shouldn't bring up the subject because it's about people. But I am also aware that for many it is a question of theology and therefore also a topic that often has the disadvantage of being so objectified that we forget that these are also people like me, with a face, a name and a story.

I am enormously grateful, even though I came out so late to my family and friends, that my family and friends continue to love me. That the fear of being rejected has not come true. Even if there were questions as to why I hadn't talked about it earlier. Many have understood how difficult it was for me in my professional context, not being able to talk about it in my church, because otherwise I would have felt the consequences very early on, which may have turned out differently today. I can understand anyone in the church if you have questions for me if you have theological challenges with this issue. Some of you may not have delved deeply into this topic. For me it is different. I have been dealing with many questions for a long time and for this, I am grateful to my family and many of my colleagues. There is also a different view than the official one of our church. There's also a different way of looking at people like me. I have always felt seen and understood by God. I was always aware that I also make mistakes and that all is not well. That I fail in relationships, that my patience has limits, that my heart can harden, that I can get angry, that I do things that harm others or myself. But I've also always believed in a God who forgives me . Who wants to change me in many areas. Who wants to make me more merciful, loving, connecting, that's why it was always for me as pastor, important to stand up for the weak and minorities. For people who have their struggles. I understand a lot because I know a lot. I understand and don't have to judge quickly. It is enough to see, to understand and to be there.

"God is a God who sees me."

I would like to continue working at Grindel to ensure that we too see people as God sees us. That we are a safe place for people with all kinds of challenges. For people who don't share everything because they are afraid of being judged, rejected or sent into the desert. I believe in a God who is different from what we think He is. He can see differently than we do, love differently than we do, hope differently than we do, and also believe differently than we do. That is exactly why it is good if we learn from HIM. Get a new outlook from HIM, for each other, knowing that we belong together and don't "have to" be against each other. Even if we see and believe things differently.

"You are a God who sees me"

Blessing: "He Who Sees You"

The Lord bless you.

God give you always every sign of his nearness.

He gives the eyes that allows you to see how valuable you and every single person are.

He give you hands ready to make peace.

He will give you ears that wisely can listen or ignore.

He will give you a mouth from which more healing words will come.

He will give you a nose that will perceive his pleasant scents again and again and show you how much your God who sees you wants to bless you.

So bless you, your loving father! Yahweh! © Sasa Gunjević