

Sermon at Closing Worship: “The harvest is plentiful’: Living with Imagination”

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Scripture Readings and Psalm

2 Corinthians 6:4, 8-10

Psalm 46

Matthew 9:35-38

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

“Christian Identity in Crisis”: This is the theme we have been reflecting on together during this conference. Yes, I think it is important to face the crisis. The crisis of Western Christianity and all the crises of our present world. I often reflect a thought from Fulbert Steffensky, who was first a Benedictine monk, then a Lutheran professor of religious education in Hamburg. Spirituality, he said, might mean today: Really seeing the beauty and the misery of this world and seeking God in it. Both to really perceive the misery and the crisis—but not only that—also to see the beauty of the world. And to seek and find in it the face of Christ.¹

Imagination in Jesus’ words

What remains of our meeting? What do I take with me? What is to be done in the crisis?

A word that I will certainly not quickly forget is “imagination.” Imagination is part of the Christian faith. When I heard this, I thought of the memorable story from Matthew:

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and illness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” (Matt 9:35-38; NIV)

1. See Fulbert Steffensky, *Schwarzbröt-Spiritualität* (Stuttgart: Radius-Verlag 2005), 17.



Ketut Lasia, Indonesia: *The Fields Are White to Harvest* (date unknown). Copyright © Stichting Zendingserfgoed. Used with permission. From *Zendingserfgoedkalender 2019*, ed. Huub Lems (Zuidland, Netherlands: Stichting Zendingserfgoed 2018), 7 (July)

What is happening here? Jesus is passing through Galilee and is shocked when he observes the people: how famished and starved and worn out they are. No one cares about their need. A small upper class dominates the land and brutally exploits the people. There seems to be no way out of the political, economic, and social crisis.

But what does Jesus say to his disciples? “*The harvest is plentiful.*” Harvest—is this not a time of joy? Harvest means work, but above all the joy of enjoying the fruits of labor. Harvest is reward, food in abundance, fellowship, celebration, fulfillment. Jesus sees the crisis and speaks of harvest? This is imagination. Imagine that the misery you are facing is not only misery, but an opportunity from God. Could that be?

Is there a visual representation of this story that suggests “imagination”? I know of two images that refer directly to this biblical text, one from Indonesia and one from Thailand. The one from Indonesia was painted by Ketut Lasia.

The painter was born in 1945 as the youngest son of a Hindu family in the painters’ village of Ubud on Bali. He spent five years

learning to paint in the Ubud style, with lifelike and detailed depictions of plants and animals. Through commissioned work for Dutch missionaries, he became involved with biblical stories. They impressed him so much that he converted to the Christian faith at the age of 22.

Take a close look at the image. What do we see? A seemingly idyllic picture. Seven people surrounded by tropical vegetation. It must be pleasantly warm. They are only lightly clad in colorful fabrics and barefoot. One of them stands in the middle and seems to be showing the others something, pointing to the ripe rice terraces. What appears to be an idyllic illustration of Matthew 9:35-38 is the expression of a deep crisis. When Ketut Lasia professed his Christian faith, he was ostracized by the Balinese community and socially isolated. From then on, he tried to show with his artwork that the Jesus story is nothing foreign but belongs to Bali. That is why he painted many biblical stories in the Ubud style. Here Lasia has painted his own story, so to speak. He sits down with a very small group of people next to this Jesus of Nazareth, who has opened his eyes to the fact that—in the middle of the crisis—it is harvest time. Jesus has opened him for imagination.

Imagination in Loehe’s life

Imagination also played a major role in the life of Wilhelm Loehe. His life’s theme was a rather sad one. He had to say goodbye far too often:

- Say goodbye to his dream of working as a city pastor. After many unsuccessful attempts to apply for a pastor’s position in a city, he realized that he would probably be banished forever to such an ugly and boring village as Neuendettelsau.
- Say goodbye to his beloved wife Helene, who had died at the age of only 24 after six years of marriage, leaving him alone with four children.
- Say goodbye to the younger generation that emigrated by the thousands from Europe in those years. In total, 70 million people were driven across the sea by crisis and hopelessness, mainly to North America and as far as Australia. In the Franconian villages, too, more and more young people packed their bags.

But Loehe decided not to resist these painful partings, but to see them as a task sent by God and to become active with astonishing confidence. Most of Loehe’s contemporaries criticized or condemned emigration and hoped that normality would finally return. Loehe, however, saw the crisis as an opportunity. He began to dream of a community across all borders of country and death. He dared to hope that emigration could lead to a renewal of the church. He imagined a truly ecumenical church. And he began to imagine mission as working for a cross-border church, connecting people around the world and across the ages.

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Imagination in practice

What about us? How can we live this “imagination”? Jesus gives three little hints in his word to the disciples.

1. Sing! “*The harvest is plentiful...*” Don’t forget: It is harvest time. There is cause for joy. There is cause for confidence. Don’t forget to sing. Like Psalm 46: “*God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea*” (Ps 46:1-2; ELW). Like Paul in 2 Corinthians: “*as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: ...sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything*” (2 Cor 6:4, 10; NIV). Like the songs we just sang in our worship.
2. Cooperate! “*... but the workers are few.*” Remember: Alone you are too few. You can’t do everything by yourselves. Join forces with others. Ally yourselves across borders. Work together. Do not be ashamed of your weakness but let yourselves be helped. You need Africa. You need help from Asia. You need support from Latin America.
3. Withdraw! “*Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.*” Jesus does not send his disciples to work, but to their knees. The priority is to withdraw and pray. Remember: It is not your work. It is not your harvest. Albert Schweitzer said at the beginning of the twentieth century, “The usual over-occupation of modern man ... means that the spiritual in him atrophies.”² What would he say today, given our busy schedules?

We don’t need to work more and worry more. But—as Thomas Schattauer said—we do “need to pay more attention to the pictures that help us to see and to trust God-with-us, God-for-us, and God’s unfolding purpose for the whole world.”³ Just go with confidence.

2. Albert Schweitzer, *Kulturphilosophie I und II* [1923] (München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2007), 26.

3. Thomas H. Schattauer, “Loehe’s Liturgical Imagination: Inspiration for Christian Identity and Mission,” *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 51, no. 1 (January 2024), 40.