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## Sermon for Installation Service of Rev. Anne Burghardt

**Romans 12:1-2** *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ!

The Apostle Paul urges us not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may discern what is the will of God. By calling us not to be conformed to this world, Paul does not label the “world”, including us, its inhabitants, as “evil”. To label the world as “evil” is not possible, as the Gospel bears witness to the God who loved the world and sent Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, to save it. Paul says, however, that we should always discern the values, the practices, the cultural concepts, and the spirits that surround us, and to do so in the light of Jesus Christ. Transformation cannot happen without the renewal of our minds, which goes hand in hand with discernment of the will of God.

Transformation, the renewal of our minds, has to do with *metanoia*, repentance. Martin Luther said in the first of his famous 95 theses that the whole life of a Christian should be one of repentance, or in Greek *metanoia*, a change of mind. There are many things that call for *metanoia*, both in the lives of an individual and in society: selfishness, disregard for the dignity of other human beings, the exploitation of God’s creation; indifference towards the struggles and sufferings of others, greed and the will to execute power over others. These tendencies express themselves in the misuse of power, the disregard of human rights, thoughtless consumerism. What we also see is the fragmentation of whole societies or forceful unification through occupation.

The ability to recognize the need for *metanoia*, the change of mind and practice, goes hand in hand with discerning God’s will for us here and today. Guidance to this discernment is given by the Greatest Commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself”. – It is interesting to note that although Jesus quotes, in the first part of the Greatest Commandment, the Law of Moses as we find it in the Pentateuch, he adds his own note to it: “with all your mind”, thus emphasizing that discernment inevitably belongs to our relationship with God and to seeking God’s will. Paul is saying that we are to examine what is God’s will, and for him

that means: what is good and pleasing and perfect. It is amazing how openly Paul formulates things here: he does not offer us templates; he does not speak about “how things have always been”, etc. Instead, he urges us to seek his will with our minds here and today.

As you and I are invited to use our minds to discern God’s will, we are also invited to listen to one another. Further, as theologians we are called to listen also to other sciences that help us to understand how human beings and the world around them function. In Estonia, we say that we believe in education. Giving such a special emphasis to education has something to do with our history, and last but not least with our Lutheran heritage. Paying attention to discernment, one can recognize that the world is not full of simplistic, black and white answers. Simplistic answers contribute to the increasing polarization that we see today. The world is complex and in the midst of this complexity, our vocation is to discern the will of God.

As a Communion of Churches, the LWF has a task to contribute to the *metanoia*, to the change of mind, and to the renewal of the minds, expressing it in action, in reducing harm that human beings do and have done to each other, and in contributing to more just and peaceful relations. This belongs to the new life in Christ, and precisely “new life in Christ” is the title that chapter 12 carries in the letter to Romans. In Romans 12:18, Paul calls to live in harmony and peace: “If it is possible, so far as it depends on us, live peaceably with all”. Paul does not mean peace at any price; he doesn’t mean negative peace that is just characterized by the lack of external conflict. True peace is characterized by just relationships and by reconciliation. Reconciliation remains one of the relevant tasks of the church; the reconciliation between God and human beings must be reflected in interhuman relations. In many contexts today, one can increasingly observe the push towards drawing up clear frontlines: who is not with us, is against us; dialogue is increasingly put into question. And yet it is only through the genuine encounter with the other that reconciliation may happen. John Lederach, a well-known Mennonite peace builder, says : “To reconcile requires a commitment to see the face of God in the other, to feel the world from their perspective, and to place ourselves, not in control of, but alongside the human experience and condition”. In today’s polarized world, where many new trenches are being dug, the churches are called to be agents of positive change and reconciliation.

The commitment to peace and reconciliation must be genuine. I spent my childhood during the times of Soviet occupation, where society was marked by a lot of hypocrisy. The streets were full of banners claiming “Fight for peace!”, “For the peace of the whole world”, etc. These banners were hanging on the streets of a state which was, at the same time, one of the leading powers in the world when it came to armament, and it constantly violated basic human rights. Thus, when Christians claim that we stand for peace, justice and reconciliation, it must be authentic, and go hand in hand with the renewal of our minds. We need to walk the talk, and talk the walk. Otherwise, we will fuel cynicism.

But what is the source of the renewal of minds, the source of new life, the source of true reconciliation and dignity? For Christians, the answer is Jesus Christ, who has come to liberate us from brokenness, and calls us to make the new creation visible in the midst of our world. There is a story about St. Dorotheos of Gaza, who lived in the 6th century and was an abbot of a monastery in which, as often happens in any human family, the monks were not getting along so well. So St Dorotheos drew a diagram in the sand to help the monks remember who they were and what they were all about. He drew a circle with a point at the center and explained that the center point is the same distance from any point on the circumference. He asked the monks to suppose that this circle is the

world and that God is the center; the straight lines drawn from the circumference to the center are the lives of human beings. Therefore, to move toward God, human beings move from the outside of the circle toward God in the center. The lesson is that when human beings are moving closer to God, they are, at the same time, also moving closer to one another and the closer they move toward one another, the closer they move toward God.

Hence it is important that we put Jesus Christ in the center, that we draw him in front of our eyes, and ask God to bestow upon us the Holy Spirit to guide us and to inspire us. To feel the freedom, Christ is giving us, and make use of it by serving our neighbor. Amen.