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LWF Pre-Assembly Paramaribo

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Liberated by God's Grace: Freedom for Living in Communion

Ways that Liberation may point us to life as a communion

I am so appreciative to our two regional vice presidents, Bishop Gloria Rojas and Bishop Susan Johnson, and my Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, for the invitation to share some theological reflections and contextual stories of the Assembly theme: Liberated by God's Grace.

I have identified four dimensions of our common call to live as communion which the assembly theme "Liberated by God's Grace" invites through our collective reflection: Good News, Repentance, Freedom to Love the Church and Freedom to love the World. The structure for thinking together is that I will introduce the theological theme, offer a brief story to illustrate the theme and invite a few questions which may prompt our conversation following the presentation. I have tried to highlight a few examples and use some of the questions from our pre-assembly material especially the text *Liberated by God's Grace*.

I. Theological Theme: The first theological theme is **Good News**. I begin with good news because to be liberated by God's grace is first to hear anew the good news. In God's own foolishness, which is wiser than our wisdom, who could have imagined that the Good news is that Jesus, the crucified one is the Messiah of Israel and the world. He is identified as Messiah by his resurrection from the dead. The good news is not an idea, for example, that God loves us, although that is true. The good news is the announcement that something good and absolutely decisive for the universe has happened. I had a professor once ask what is the good news and why is it good? When I began to teach systematic theology I would add and for whom? This question was given both at the start of the semester and as the final exam. If you had to respond right now how might you answer the question, "what is the good news?" For whom is it good? What makes it news?

I sometimes wonder if those of us who tend to larger structures of church bodies if we sometimes forget what is the good news. It is easy to confuse good news with a project or program that gets results: perhaps a strategy for the renewal of the church or for managing growth, perhaps an educational program, perhaps careful attention to cross-cutting strategies, perhaps the convening of local political leaders and church people to address a local concern. As a president of a seminary sometimes it is easy for me to confuse the good news with a balanced budget or adequate scholarships for students or a diverse faculty and staff deeply engaged with the mission. All of these things are important but none of them are good news. Jesus is risen from the dead, that is the good news, that is liberation by God's grace.

Being liberated by God's grace is good news because it means that death no longer has ultimate power. Jesus, not death, will have the last word. But the resurrection of Jesus was not personal vindication. Jesus has become the first fruits of all that sleep. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall be made alive. He will reign until he has put all things under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. And then God will be everything in everyone. (I Cor. 15:22-28)

This is a vision for the future and it beckons us to follow it. Of course Jesus is also about the past, our past, the world's past. There on the cross he takes sin and evil and death into God's own being

and history, where it is overcome forever. But the good news is first and foremost **a vision for the future**. It is a vision for our life as persons and as a communion of churches. Because Jesus is risen, everything has changed radically. We are set free from serving the powers of death with our lives, our fears, our policies. We are set free from having to protect ourselves at whatever cost to others. We are set free from the dreadful necessity to grab all that we can because we only go around once. We are set free from the compulsion to cling to every day and hour of life in this world.

Robert Farrar Capon, an Anglican theologian, wrote that Jesus did not come to repair the repairable, correct the correctable, improve the improvable. **Jesus came to raise the dead!** The only final condition for eternal participation in Christ's victory is that we be dead, 100% dead! But how do we know this bold and transformative promise of God? During the last five years the LWF has given sustained attention to pondering this question of how we can know about who God is. The project was the hermeneutics project, that is how can we understand the Holy Scripture which bears witness to God's promises and presence for the world. Hans Pater Grosshans described the importance of how we attend to scripture: "It is part of the overall interpretation process that believers from different situations and contexts share with one another the insights that they receive from their individual and collective listening to God's Word. The resultant diversity of understanding of Holy Scripture bears witness to the lively and concrete nature of God's communication with God's people. The Triune God is not like an imperialistic ruler who, from a fitting distance, would uniformly send God's messages to people all around the world, and would expect that they all live their lives in the same homogenous way." (p. 55) Part of our challenge as a communion of churches is attending to ways that God speaks through God's word and trusting that where there are deep disagreements we entrust our future to the one who raised Jesus from the dead.

Story: Some years ago on a pastoral training assignment a person named Harry illustrated to me what the good news means and the ways that God continues to speak through God's word. Harry was very frail and unable to leave his home, tethered to a large oxygen tank which helped him to breathe. Initially I was reluctant to visit Harry in part because the home smelled of mold, human sweat and other bodily fluids, there were piles of what seemed to me to be rubbish everywhere. Harry also had a pretty strong opinion of pastors and it was not favorable. Nevertheless, I went every week at the same time for months often making small talk whilst he said very little. On each visit we spent time reading the scripture for the previous Sunday and I shared a taped recording of the sermon from that Sunday. Harry always had very different ideas on the text than the preacher had proclaimed-especially when it was the pastoral intern. Finally after several months he asked me to go into the basement and I saw a very large weaver's loom-you know the kind that you place cloth on so it weaves tapestries alongside an enormous pile of old clothes carefully torn into strips of cloth. Harry told me that he made rugs out of the old clothes that other people had thrown away. He said that Jesus took him off the old clothes pile and gave him a purpose and meaning so he could bring joy to other people. He also noted that most people, including and perhaps especially pastors, failed to see him beyond the physical limits and condition of his house. He had been set free to love his neighbors who were not able to buy anything new so he gave them something new along with a testimony to what God could do in their lives. I have never forgotten Harry especially at times when it seems like I may have something in a biblical text all figured out. It is at those times when it is more likely that I haven't begun to see what God is really doing.

Christ will raise us all, and somehow bend us into shape so that we become the human beings we were intended to be. This pre-assembly can be a call for renewal of faith in the Good News of Jesus Christ which opens ways for us to hear God's word and see ourselves in all of our vulnerabilities and

weaknesses and with the gifts God has given us so that we might be free for hearing, seeing and living what God is doing for the world through our witness as the church and as a communion.

Questions to ponder:

1. How would you describe the Good News? Have you ever read scripture with someone and heard something very different than the other person?
2. What expectations do you have when you read or hear a biblical text? Do you expect the biblical passage to tell you something meaningful for your personal life, your church and your understanding of the world?
3. What is crucial in the interpretation of a biblical text, in sermons or Bible studies? Should the interpretation of biblical texts be adapted to contemporary understandings? How should we deal with different interpretations of the same biblical text in evangelical churches? How does the Freedom in Christ give you eyes to see, ears to hear and a heart to love?

II. Theological Theme: Repentance. This good news opens the way and the freedom for repentance. Martin Marty writes about repentance in his new book *October 31 1517: Martin Luther and the Day that Changed the World*. Marty reminds us of the first of the 95 theses: When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said “Repent,” (Matt. 4:17) he intended the entire life of believers to be repentance.” Marty describes the twofold meaning of repentance: an inner turning from sin and penance or outward actions that show proof of one’s repentance. I wonder what are the areas in our churches and in our communities which call for repentance? When we were together in Stuttgart we participated in a communal act of repentance for the 16th century condemnations of the Anabaptists. AS we approach Windhoek, I wonder what structures invite our collective repentance?

Gottfried Brakemeier writes in our text (p. 25) that we must give attention to the social structures which continue to wreak havoc on our communities. He writes: “Liberation theology has correctly recognized that sin can take the form of unjust social structures, an insight that cannot be abandoned again. It is part of the church’s task to name and denounce abuse. That happened for instance in 1977 at the Lutheran World Federation’s Sixth Assembly in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The delegates declared that the system of apartheid was incompatible with the Lutheran confession; those who still clung to it placed themselves outside the community; racism was sin. Wherever necessary, the church will press for a change in prevailing laws. For love “does not rejoice in wrongdoings” (1 Cor 13:6). Christians can call for resistance on grounds of conscience. In any case, ministering to suffering people also includes a readiness to take political action.”

Story: Luther Seminary is located in St. Paul, Minnesota in a neighborhood called St. Anthony Park and adjacent to a neighborhood called Falcon Heights. In July whilst I was traveling with my 17 year old nephew in Britain and France, I received word about the tragic death of Philando Castille, a 32 year old cafeteria supervisor in a local school. Philando was pulled over by police and while reaching for his identification was shot and killed by police. Our seminary became a place for gathering the community to repent. To repent not only for the tragic death of an important member of the community but for the ways that so many of us did not and still do not understand that this is not just an isolated case of one cop and one more unfortunate shooting but rather that we have a systemic problem of racism which continues to go unaddressed in any systemic and meaningful way.

Questions to Ponder:

1. What are the issues in your own church for which we need repentance?

2. How far does God's liberating grace extend in church and society in your context and does your church see justice as part of God's liberating grace? What blocks honest, open conversation about things which really matter?
3. The church should not interfere in political matters. That is a frequent demand. It is grounded in the fact that people say the church has to care for people's salvation and the state for their welfare. Can salvation and welfare be separated so neatly?

III. Theological Theme: Because Christ is risen, we are **free to love the church**. I don't mean the church that gives us warm fuzzies, that embraces us with comfort and love. I mean the real church, the church that fills us with dismay that robs us of hope, that pursues agendas so contrary to the mind of Christ that we want to despair. That's the church we are free to love. Kjell Nordstokke notes in his chapter on "The Reformation and the understanding of being the church" that "It is the proclamation of the gospel that forms the church's being and sending into the world, and not the other way round. The church exists and has its mandate by Scripture alone, by faith alone, by grace alone, through Christ alone and to God's glory alone." (p. 27). The church that elects one pope who seems unwilling to address the urgent issues facing church and world and then another pope who seems to be the epitome of serving as the hands and feet of Christ for the most vulnerable in this world. The church in Kansas that seems determined to pit Genesis against evolution instead of recognizing that a literalistic interpretation of Genesis has little to do with the origins and meanings of the traditions in Genesis and the place of creation theology in the proclamation of the gospel. The church that is the ELCA which threatened to tear itself apart over the issue of blessing same-sex unions, an issue that is not the gospel which constitutes and unites the church. The church which fails repeatedly to provide a place at the table for women. That is the church which Jesus' resurrection frees us to love.

We are free to imprint on our hearts and minds the great apostolic words from Ephesians 4: "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, putting up with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." In the last chapter of Luke's Gospel Jesus tells the disciple community to await being "clothed with power from on high." We do not need to be "clothed with power from on high" to join a fitness club, root for a football team—even the Brazilian football team, have dinner with our friends, or champion causes with other like-minded people.

But we do need "power from on high" to be the church, that is, to be so grasped by Christ that we can "put up with each other" in a community that can sustain its unity in the midst of disagreement over emotionally charged issues, without demonizing or disregarding, excluding or humiliating each other." (*Faithful Conversation*, Daniel Olson, page 102) Olson points out that our present situation gives the church a magnificent opportunity to be the church – to disagree profoundly over truly important matters without turning away from each other or turning against each other. We have a remarkable opportunity to be a communion of churches where even in the midst of deep disagreements over things which really matter for the life of faith, we bear witness to God's love for us by loving each other.

Story: One way this freedom to love the church came home to me in a powerful way recently was at the ELCA's recent churchwide assembly which occurs every three years. Standing on the platform before the cameras and our whole church was Roman Catholic Bishop Denis Madden, Auxiliary

Bishop of Baltimore, Maryland and the rest of the task force of Lutherans and Roman Catholics who have been at work for years preparing a consensus document on what Lutherans and Roman Catholics have reached consensus on since 1965. “*Declaration on the Way*” is a powerful testimony to what it means to journey together in the midst of deep differences. At the conclusion of the presentation the assembly voted overwhelmingly to approve this statement. As the voting concluded, our presiding bishop Eaton gave to Bishop Madden the communion chalice which we were going to use in the eucharist later. The bishop received the chalice, from a female presiding bishop, as a sign of God’s future time when we might actually share in the Eucharist.

Questions to Ponder:

1. What are the fault lines or difficult issues which make your church hard to love?
2. What are the issues in other churches which you find hard to reconcile?
3. What role should the texts of Holy Scripture play in the formation and decision making of the church and its governing bodies today? What is the relationship between Holy Scripture to other contextual and scientific insights?

IV. Theological Theme: The resurrection of Jesus **frees us to love the world.** “Freed by God’s Love to change the world” is the motto of the LWF Young Reformers network. I wonder what it might mean if we took their theme for us all? I think of that great cosmic and mysterious universe set in motion by the creative word of God, called into being through the creating Logos, given a life which is pointed toward a new heaven and a new earth by the breath of the Holy Spirit. We free to love our own small planet placed into our care as stewards of God’s gift. Such love of our world was never more in need.

So much current political debate about care for this planet ignores science and presumes the earth and its resources belong to those who have the money to pay for it. *Time* magazine had a cover story on Ann Coulter a few years ago. She is self-described right wing political commentator. She has a new book out called “*In Trump We Trust*” In the *Time* article she was quoted as saying: “God gave us the earth. We have dominion over the plants, the animals, the seas. God said, ‘Earth is yours. Take it. Rape it. It’s yours.” To which Peter Fenn, her Democratic counterpart on a Fox news broadcast responded: “We’re Americans, so we should consume as much of the earth’s resources as fast as we possibly can.” To which Coulter replied, “Yes. Yes! As opposed to living like the Indians.” (*Time*, March 25, 2005, page 37) Coulter gets tens of thousands of dollars for a speech for throwing this inflammatory rhetoric to her audiences. No politician would dare to say such things, but the audiences love it. What we must do is look at the policies proposed and imposed by law and decree, the lack of concern for pollution and our consumption of fossil fuels. The World-watch Institute publishes an annual “State of the World” report. The goal of the World-watch Institute is for our generation to hand on to future generations a world undiminished in its capacity to sustain life. We are not waiting for Christ to rapture us out of the world so that we can have a ring-side seat as the world is destroyed. We are called to be stewards, to hand on a world as we received from our parents and grandparents.

We are called to love the world, to want clean air and water for everyone, to give ourselves into the service of peace instead of blindly following our leaders in senseless wars, to commit to the cause of justice especially where our institutions and our country are guilty of injustice. That is a big order. But we are set free to pursue it by the resurrection of Christ, who has put an end to the dominion of death. We are free for the battle because the victory is already won. I want to share one final story which illustrates a project to love the world in our own context.

Story: Dios es nuestro amparo y fortaleza, ... I hope I said God is our refuge and strength, from Psalm 46:1. The word “amparo” in Spanish means the protection of a living creature from suffering or damage. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America’s (ELCA) strategy to Accompany Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities (AMMPARO) was envisioned after witnessing the plight of children who are forced to flee their communities in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. Thanks to our partnership with companion churches in the region, including companion synod relationships, and existing ministries in the U.S., the ELCA is helping to ensure that these vulnerable children are protected. In 2014, almost 70,000 children and another 70,000 families arrived in the U.S., most from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. Although the number of Central American children and family arrivals reflected an overall decrease in 2015, the number began climbing again in August 2015. As of early 2016, conditions that caused the forced displacement of these vulnerable families had not changed. Deported children still lack government services that will ensure their well-being or, more importantly, guarantee their safety. The findings from an ELCA leadership journey to Central America and Mexico learned that:

- Children and families continue to leave because of complex and interrelated reasons, including chronic violence, poverty, environmental displacement and lack of opportunities. These problems are exacerbated by the failure of governments to address these issues, leaving many with no choice but to flee.
- Gang and other forms of violence greatly affect faith communities in the region. For example, Lutheran churches have reported a dramatic loss in youth leadership because young people have been forced to flee or are unable to leave their homes to participate in church activities because of gang violence.
- Central American children and families seeking asylum in Mexico are detained for extended periods of time. Children are deported from Mexico without being screened to ensure that they are not trafficking victims or that they will not be harmed if returned to their communities. The U.S. government has financed and expressed support for Mexico’s enforcement-only approach to vulnerable children and families. Jesus professed love for our neighbors as a fundamental reflection of our identity. The ELCA is a church with migrant roots that recognizes we are all made in God’s image and have the right to dignity and respect. In its social message on immigration, the ELCA declares that, “The presence of newcomers in our church and society ... deepens our belief that ‘all people are God’s creatures, sinners for whom Christ died,’ and call for respect of the human dignity of all.”

Questions to Ponder:

1. What kind of diaconal work is your church and local congregation involved in?
2. How does this work express the theme of the Reformation Anniversary, “Liberated by God’s Grace”?
3. In what ways do you see diakonia as an integral dimension of the church, its being and its mission?

God continues to call all of us to be grasped by the great good news that Jesus is risen, to be taken up into Christ’s offering in the meal, to be the church by putting up with each other in love, and to care for our world. Being liberated by God’s grace opens for us a renewal of faith, the call to repentance, the freedom to love the church and the freedom to love the world. I look forward to the ways we can continue to learn from each other and out contexts so that together we might bear witness to world of what it means to be liberated by God’s grace.