

Living a Life of Thanksgiving

11/20/22

SJN

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God, our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

God's Word comes to us this morning from our Gospel lesson where we hear these words once more: "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice;... and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet... giving him thanks." (Luke 17:15-16) This is the Word of the Lord.

This may seem an unusual question and one you may not have been asked before by a pastor.... What kind of a leper are you? Now, this is a Thanksgiving service but, really... Lepers and Thanksgiving?... they don't seem to go together. Well this question actually has quite a bit to do with Thanksgiving as we'll see in discovering how a leper has something to teach us about Thanksgiving.

In our Gospel reading, we meet 10 men who have leprosy... a horrible, awful disease. It severely disfigures a person, starting out as small white patches on the skin... and eventually spreading to other parts of the body, causing the crippling of its victim and eventually... death.

A diagnosis of leprosy in Jesus' day was essentially a death sentence, much the way a diagnosis of AIDS had been at one time in our society. But instead of being placed in something like Hospice care, the patient was exiled from the community, or sent to a leper colony. Not only did a person afflicted with this disease face physical pain and suffering... they would also face emotional pain and suffering... as they would be forced to say good bye to loved ones, family and friends, and their whole way of life... in order that they would not spread the disease to others.

These 10 lepers are in that situation. They're facing isolation from the outside world. If someone who was not a leper came near them, they were required to shout out "unclean, unclean, stay away". ... not exactly the way one would envision wanting to spend their days. In fact, these 10 men may not normally have been acquainted with each other, with the exception that they've banded together because of a common disease... leprosy.

The word about Jesus has spread by this point. Even these 10 lepers have heard about Him. They've heard about how He has healed the sick... made blind men see... help those who were mute to speak... or those lame to walk again.

But what would their chances be of having Jesus come in their area, let alone take the time to heal these outcasts from society? As it happened, they heard that Jesus was passing along that lonely boarder between Samaria and Galilee where these lepers lived. They even think they see him coming in their direction. Now remember, the law said that these men had to shout out "Unclean, unclean!" if someone was coming their way. And they did cry out that day. But their cry was different. They cried out "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" They recognized their condition. They knew that without Jesus' power to heal them, they would never be rid of the leprosy... without His help... they faced certain death.

So what did Jesus do for them? He says "Go... show yourselves to the priests." Why in the world would they be asked to do that? One of the responsibilities that God had given the priests was to declare lepers healed. If - for some reason - a leper thought that he had been cured of leprosy, he was to go to the priest and the priest was to make the call as to whether or not the person was clean. If the evidence showed that the person was indeed clean... an appropriate sacrifice would be made... the patient would be declared "clean"... and allowed to return home and resume their life.

Those words - "show yourselves to the priests" - would have only been spoken if Jesus promised that their leprosy would be healed. But, at first glance... the spots on the skin were still there. Yet, Jesus has told them to go and show themselves to the priests. So... what will they do? Do they believe the Word of the Lord and go? - or - do they wait... wait for some proof first before they go? Believing that Jesus has the power to heal and save them from their leprosy... they go.

And then... it happens! Those dreaded spots were disappearing. They were healed. Think of the joy that they all must have experienced! They were all getting their lives back. They all could go back and hug wives, play with their kids, meet with friends in the local marketplaces... they'd be able to live again!

Now... up to this point, the 10 lepers did everything together. But... as they made their way to the priests... and saw with their own eyes that Jesus had healed them... one of them stopped... turned around... and went back to Jesus to give Him thanks and praise for what He had done. He knew the priest could wait... he wanted to return and give thanks to Jesus. But the other 9... what happened to them? Did Jesus take away the gift He had given them? No. They were still cleansed from the leprosy... but they had left before He was done giving.

When the one Samaritan leper returns to Jesus, falls at his feet, and worships Him... we hear Jesus ask "were not ten cleansed, but where are the other nine. Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

Here, then beloved is the difference in faith... between the Samaritan leper... and the other 9 who were healed. All ten had faith that Jesus could heal them of their leprosy. But that's where the similarity ends. As soon as they notice they are healed... the 9 keep running to the priests so that they can get on with their earthly lives... while this Samaritan - who is not of the covenant of the Jews... not viewed as one of God's chosen people - he returns to Jesus, even before he's been declared ceremonially "clean"... he falls at Jesus' feet, and worships him, giving Jesus thanks and praise for the healing that has taken place. But then we see that Jesus has even more than simply physical healing to give.

In response... Jesus says to this thankful Samaritan, who has returned to Jesus to give Him thanks and praise... "Rise and go; your faith has made you well." What kind of faith... is Jesus talking about here? While the ESV translation says "your faith has made you well", it can also be translated "your faith has saved you."

This Samaritan's faith saved him from the crippling, deadly effects of leprosy... but it also recognized the giver of that gift... that this Jesus was His savior from sin, death, and the power of the devil. The physical healing from the leprosy was just a sign of the eternal healing that Jesus had come to this world to give. That's why this Samaritan returned to give praise and thanks to Jesus. The other nine only wanted something for this life... but since they didn't recognize what Jesus was truly offering - healing from sin, death, and eternal punishment - they didn't see a need to go back and give thanks and praise to the One who would take their sins to the cross and die for them there... to save them not just from a disease... but for eternity.

So, with Thanksgiving upon us, friends... and this as our Gospel reading... let me get back to the original question I asked you earlier. Which kind of leper are you? There is certainly a lot to consider in answering that question, in light of our upcoming Thanksgiving celebrations.

There are many, many people out there - across this land - who do not believe in God... Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... yet... they will sit down at a dinner table Thursday for a big feast... and utter some words of thanks to some unknown god for providing the material stuff they have in this world. In a way, they're like the nine lepers of our Gospel reading. They've received something from God in this earthly life... and that's just fine with them. That is all they're looking for. They might utter some words of thanks - one day a year... or maybe not - but the problem is... they run away from God... before He is done giving.

There are others who don't even bother giving thanks at all on Thanksgiving. They see the day as a chance to gorge themselves on turkey, stuffing, gravy, pie, and then watch lots of football on TV with extended family in the house.

For us as Christians, brothers and sisters... when we look at our own lives... do we daily, give thanks and praise to God for all the things He provides for us in this body and life? We do have so much to be thankful for.

In the explanation to the first Article of the Apostles' Creed regarding God the Father, we learn about Thanksgiving. It states, "He also gives me clothing and shoes, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life." These are all gifts from God... good gifts. And He gives them to us whether we say "thank you" or not. He gives these gifts to all people, regardless if they recognize Him as the Giver of these gifts, or not.

But, God doesn't just provide for our earthly life. Through his Son, Jesus Christ, He also has more gifts to give. On the cross, Jesus suffered and died for the sins of the world... your sins... my sins... the sins of all... including those times where we've failed to thank God for what He has provided for us.

He then rose from the dead on Easter Sunday so that our sins of ingratitude - and all the rest - are left there. When we recognize who has truly healed us... when we realize that even in the midst of grief, suffering, pain, and sorrow ALL the gifts that God provides for us - that everything we have in this life is a gift from Him - we want to respond in thankfulness and praise.

You have come to God's house this morning, just as that one Samaritan leper did in our Gospel reading... to come here - into the presence of Jesus - to give Him thanks and praise for all that He has given you... and because of that... Jesus has gifts to give you. Through His Word and through the Sacrament of Holy Communion that you receive, Jesus is giving you gifts... He gives you forgiveness, life, and salvation. These gifts... from a word from Jesus... spoken through the lips of a Pastor... words like: "I forgive you all of your sins." "Take, eat, this is my body... take, drink, this is my blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins."

He even brings the gift of faith to young Alex this morning. "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And so we give thanks and praise to God for Alex's adoption into the family of Christ.

What kind of a leper are you? Are you one of the thankless lepers who is simply looking for things in this life... and once you get them, you run away from Jesus... without even uttering a word of thanks... ignoring whatever other gifts He has to give you... gifts that are more important?

Or... are you like the “foreigner” - the “Thankful Leper”- the one who returned to give glory to God, and received even more gifts from Jesus? The answer to this question, friends lies not just in one day of the year... but throughout every day of our lives... living as thankful servants of Jesus Christ... showing our faith through our thankfulness... coming to God’s house week after week to give Him thanks and praise for what He has done for us... and to receive the even better gifts that He has to offer us.

May we be thankful lepers, beloved... who return here to give our Lord thanks and praise... not just on Thanksgiving... but living a life of thanksgiving to Jesus Christ... for giving you – and me - the gifts of healing for this life... and for eternal life. This is the Word of the Lord. Amen.