

The Sacrifice of Thanksgiving

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

Our text for Thanksgiving Day is the Gospel according to Luke which was just read.

The Liturgy in the Church, that is God's public service, is full of the language of thanksgiving. In the prayer office of Morning Prayer, our order of worship for today, as the Lord opens our lips, the call to worship is confirmed by the singing of the Venite:

*"O come let us sing to the Lord, let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation, let us come into His presence with thanksgiving."*¹

Then, following our readings, the leader speaks, "*O Lord have mercy on us,*" to which the people respond, "*Thanks be to God.*"

In the Collect prayer for Thanksgiving Day we pray,

"Give us Lord, Your Holy Spirit, that we may heartily acknowledge Your merciful goodness toward us, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience."

And finally, in the traditional ending of this service the leader chants, "*Let us bless the Lord,*" and the congregation responds once again, "*Thanks be to God.*" From beginning to end there is thanksgiving.

So, despite a singular day being set aside for national thanksgiving, the Church of God knows that her call is to give thanks in all circumstances and at all times—a truth which is clearly reflected in her liturgy. And just as thanksgiving permeates our public worship, so also it ought to flow forth into every aspect of our lives. But for something that is supposed to be such an integral part of the Christian life—something that is meet, right, and salutary for us to do at all times and in all places, not only do we persistently not give thanks but we often have no idea what it even means for the Christian to say, "*Thanks be to God.*"

What I mean, is that saying "thank you" for most people is really just reduced to an act of politeness. My generation has even adopted the language of "no problem." Basically, it would be rude to receive a gift from someone without acknowledging their kindness; so, to keep up appearances, "I'll say thanks." And to make sure people know that I'm raising my kids well, "I'll force them to write a thank you card for that five bucks that they got from their Aunt." The economy of thanksgiving for many is just a matter of good sound American values. In the

¹ Lutheran Service Book, p 236, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, ©2006

grocery store it marks a proper business exchange when the cashier says, “thank you,” and the customer takes their bags and says, “thank you,” back. And when it comes to personal relationships, we know that bad people don’t give thanks, so I better let others know how good of a person I am by always saying, “thank you.”

But the reality is, that when God’s people sing, “*Thanks be to God,*” over and over again in the liturgy, and when the one leper from our text returns to give thanks to Jesus, there’s much more being communicated than just simple acts of politeness.

Looking at our text then, when Jesus saw the lepers crying out for mercy, He told them a few words that really, only one of them understood entirely... And his eventual understanding of Jesus’ words also led to a right understanding of thanksgiving. Jesus words were,

“...*journey and show yourselves to the priests.*”²

You see, in the Old Testament Levitical code, lepers were considered unclean and unfit to partake in all areas of communal living—both in worship and daily life. They were outcasts and aliens in the truest sense of the word—sent to live alone outside the camp, and commanded to cry out “Unclean, unclean” at every passerby.

However, if somehow the leper was healed of his malady, he would be allowed back in the community, but only through a process of cleansing. For part of that purification, the leper would go to the temple, be examined by the priest, and then, outside the camp he would offer a sacrifice for spiritual cleansing that corresponded to his physical cleansing. And the blood of the sacrifice would be sprinkled on the leper seven times, purifying him to be brought back into the communion of worship and daily life. And so, Jesus’ words are meant to direct the lepers to the place of sacrifice. The lepers are supposed to journey to that place where God covers sins and where His people offer thanksgiving.

The first five words from our text show the full weight of Jesus’ imperatives to the lepers. Luke records that Jesus was “*on the Way to Jerusalem.*”³ This detail is important because earlier in the Gospel it says that Jesus set his face to Jerusalem. He set His face there, because it was necessary for Him to do so. As Jesus himself stated at the beginning of his ministry:

² *Luke 17:14a.*

³ *Luke 17:11.*

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. ⁴

Jesus is the one anointed by God the Father to be the one-time sacrifice to cover all sin and all uncleanness. Jesus, in His very person, is the Great High Priest who offers Himself up on the cross to set at liberty those who are captive to sin. He is the very Temple where God gives peace to all people. So, when Jesus spoke to the 10 lepers, He was directing them to God's place of redemption. He was directing them back to Himself. For in Him, all the purity laws for lepers, and all the purification needs of all people for all time, were being fulfilled.

Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem. And just as the sacrifice for the lepers' cleansing was to take place outside of the camp, so Christ would be led outside the city of Jerusalem and nailed to a cross, there baptizing the world in His cleansing blood. Jesus is the sacrifice that covers sins, and every law of the Old Testament was given to point people back to Him. The eyes of all look to Jesus, and he satisfies the desires of every living thing.

So, as the 10 lepers *"went they were cleansed."* ⁵ And *"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 thanks to him."* ⁶

All 10 lepers were healed bodily that day, but the truth is that only one of them, the Samaritan, the outsider of outsiders, he was the only one who was saved. The Greek word translated "made well" in your bulletins literally means "saved." Unlike the nine who called to Jesus only as their miracle healer, the Samaritan leper came to receive not just physical relief for his skin condition but healing for his soul. Sinners petition God for physical needs, but more than that they should petition Him for the deliverance from evil and a blessed death.

And no, the leper wasn't saved because he gave thanks, or because he praised God. Jesus didn't bless him with salvation because of the act of coming back to Him. It's not that the leper believed super hard, as if faith is a human work that conjures up its own healing. His sacrifice of thanksgiving was not the cause of his salvation, it was the result of it. The Samaritan leper was saved because the Word of Jesus led him to the place where salvation is received—at the feet of Jesus Himself. Faith is simply receiving from Jesus.

⁴ Luke 4:18.

⁵ Luke 17:14b.

⁶ Luke 17: 25.

So, in the end, this text, like our order of worship for today, shows us not only a beautiful picture of faith, but of true thanksgiving—for the two are linked together. Just as faith clings to Jesus Christ alone and rests in Him unceasing, thanksgiving is returning to Jesus Christ in faith to receive more. That is why the Gospel message, that is the good news of Jesus Christ to seek and save the lost, is at every corner of Morning Prayer and also central in every other good order of worship in God’s Church... and that is why the leper who was healed returned to Jesus.

Thanksgiving is the fruit of the Gospel. And because God’s forgiveness never ceases, neither does thanksgiving. “*Thanks be to God*” is the never-ending cry of sinners who know that God desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. It is the prayer that recognizes that because God desires mercy and not sacrifice, He will never stop giving.

So, what does it mean to give thanks? Well, to use the language of the psalmist again,

*What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits to me, I will offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and will call on the name of the Lord, I will take the cup of salvation, and will call on the name of the Lord.*⁷

The sacrifice of thanksgiving is coming to Christ over and over again to receive His gifts of forgiveness and life. It is taking a hearty gulp from the cup of salvation in faith that, on the cross, Jesus has drunk the cup of God’s wrath to the very dregs. Thanksgiving is coming to the feet of Jesus, like the leper, to get more.

*We give thanks unto to the Lord, for He is good and His mercy endureth forever.*⁸

When Jesus first had mercy on the lepers he told them to “*journey and show themselves to the priests.*”⁹ And since God’s mercy that flows from the cross never ends, that is why Jesus says to the leper who came back, “*Rise and journey.*”¹⁰ The English word translated “go” implies departure, but the Greek word is the same word used at the beginning of the text when Jesus was journeying to Jerusalem and when Christ first spoke to the lepers. So, Jesus doesn’t tell the leper to leave Him, He tells the leper to follow Him. Christ directs those who come to Him to keep coming to Him; because where Jesus is, there is salvation too.

⁷ Psalm 116: 12-13.

⁸ Psalm 107:1.

⁹ Luke 17:14a.

¹⁰ Luke 17:19a.

But for you here today, no matter how much you try, you cannot journey back to Calvary or fall at the feet of Jesus in the same way that the leper did. You can't walk the road to Jerusalem, sit with Christ in the upper room, pray with Him in Gethsemane, stand with Mary at the foot of the cross, or gaze into the empty tomb with Peter. Yet, God's gift to you today, on this day of Thanksgiving, is that you can come to this place here, just as you have now, and receive all the fullness of Christ in His means of grace.

Remember that Jesus promised, where two or three are gathered in Jesus' Name, there He will be also. Here Christ gives you the cup of salvation. On Sunday, that cup of salvation will be given under the bread and wine, which are Christ's very body and blood.

Today he does so through sung, spoken, and preached word. In this place, at the foot of this cross, Jesus sprinkles you with His blood, cleansing you from all of your sins. And so, we join the leper, praying, "*O Lord have mercy on us. Thanks be to God.*" Amen.

And the peace of God which passes all human understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Deuteronomy 8:1-10; 1 Timothy 2:1-4; Luke 17:11-19

National Day of Thanksgiving

Catalina Lutheran Church

Vicar Jesse Schlie

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