

“Thank *Who?*”

Thanksgiving Eve

Luke 17:11-19

“Was no one found to give thanks and praise except this foreigner” Luke 17:18

Last Thanksgiving Eve I found myself standing in the middle of a crowded grocery store preparing for a day. The time was 8:30pm the evening of Wednesday, November 27, 2013. The place was Vons shopping center. We originally had plans to drive to a friend’s house in Yucaipa and join them and their family for Thanksgiving, just as we did the previous two Thanksgivings. However, plans changed late in the game last year. I started coming down with the symptoms of a cold and so we decided to cancel the trip. As a result of the last minute cancelation, Talitha and I found ourselves in the middle of a Vons grocery store gathering items to prepare our first homemade Thanksgiving meal together as a married couple. So there we were, standing in the middle of a crowded grocery store preparing for a day—a day of Thanksgiving.

The store was crowded, of course, because many others were also preparing for a day of Thanksgiving in the same way—through last minute preparations. We want the day to be perfect so we have to make sure we have the perfect foods to make the perfect meal. We gather the stuffing, sweet potatoes, turkey, ingredients to make green bean casserole, and the pumpkin pie. This is good. Many of the reasons we do this is because we value the tradition of Thanksgiving. We value that time with friends and family over a good home cooked meal.

Yet, in preparing for the Day of Thanksgiving by focusing on making the day perfect, might we sometimes give the wrong impression that thanksgiving is only about a day? We might think that as long as the relatives get a long and the traditional foods were served it was a successful thanksgiving. And then the very next day we might show that we stuffed an attitude of thanksgiving in the refrigerator along with the leftover turkey, sweet potatoes, stuffing, green bean casserole, and pumpkin pie. We might show an *attitude of thanklessness* the very next day by complaining because we missed out on that great black Friday deal on a new television. Yes, as God’s people we can get so caught up into making thanksgiving about a day that we forget that our God has redeemed us to be a thankful people every day. “Come Ye Thankful People, Come!” as we remembered in the opening hymn. He has called us to live a life of thanksgiving.

On this Thanksgiving Eve as I lead you all in worship and preach for all of you, I am reminded that one of the things for which I am thankful is my Seminary education. After all, it was the path that brought me here as your Pastor! I am particularly thankful for many opportunities during my residential Seminary

experience to have conversations with students, staff, and faculty members. One of those conversations took place during a lunch that I had with one of my Old Testament professors. During this conversation I learned a little more about what it means to live a life of thanksgiving.

At one point in the conversation my professor paused, he looked up at me and said, “Josh, how well do you think God’s people know God?” I wasn’t quite sure what to say in response so I just continued chewing my sandwich. He then said, “Let me tell you what I mean. I have been married for over twenty years and there are times that I look at my wife and realize that I am not sure how well I know her. If I have doubts about how well I know my own spouse, how much more deeply can I come to know God?” He then paused, took a bite of his sandwich, and said, in between bites, “Maybe if pastors want to grow God’s Church, they should start by growing God’s people. Maybe if pastors want to grow God’s people they should be intentional about helping God’s people to know their God more and more.”

Today in our Gospel reading St. Luke unfolds a picture for us that brings these two ideas together— *knowing more and more the one to whom we thank and living a life of thanksgiving*. This one leper who returns to thank Jesus gives us a visual picture of a life of thanksgiving by reminding us *who it is we thank and leading us to know Him more and more*. By knowing more and more the one to whom we thank, we come to grow in living a life of thanksgiving.

These ten lepers in our Gospel reading were outcasts of society who were living on the edge of their community. That is where Jesus meets this skin-diseased group. The beginning of our Gospel reading says, “On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers who stood at a distance . . .” (Lk 17:11-12). Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem where he would eventually die and rise for outcasts, sinners, those who are on the border of death and life. And as he was walking on the border of two regions, there he met people whom the rest of the citizens in those regions casts to the edge of life.

Actually, the outcasts met him! We read, “And he was met by ten lepers who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us” (Lk 19:12-13). Ten marginalized, ostracized, and diseased people who stand at a distance, at the edge of life, echoing a plea for mercy to a man they think will listen and take action.

And this man did indeed listen. This man did take action. Specifically, the God-man Jesus took action by speaking a Word. A powerful Word that accomplishes things when it is spoken. When Jesus speaks things happen. In this case, ten lepers were healed of a disease that once left them on the margins of society. Ten broken, diseased people have not only their bodies restored, but also their status in society, their relationships with family members and friends—restored! They brought their sickness to this Jesus that they called, “Master,” and even at a distance he spoke a word that healed and restored them. But only one healed leper *knew the one to whom thanks is to be given*. Only one person demonstrated a connection between *knowing more and more the one to whom we thank for all things and living a life of thanksgiving*.

We read in the Book of Leviticus that whoever was cured of leprosy had to be declared cleansed by a priest (Lev 14:2). We read that “as they went they were cleansed” (Lk 17:14). And so Jesus obeys the Jewish custom and instructs the ten lepers to go to the priest for validation of their cleansing. But one did not do that. And through his act of apparent disobedience that one leper shows, in a remarkable way, an even greater act of obedience to God.

This one leper who turned back to praise and gives thanks to God shows that *he knows the one to whom thanks should be given*. He bypasses the priests to go to Jesus, the Great High Priest. As the writer of Hebrews says, This Jesus is our high priest who is able to “sympathize with our weaknesses” (Heb 4:15). Therefore, “Let us with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:16).

This Jesus even sympathizes with your weaknesses. He can sympathize with your weakness because *he knows mankind. He knows you*. He knows the depth of your Sin and the details of your sinful struggles. He knows your thanklessness. He knows of the times that we settle for a superficial knowledge of and relationship with him. He knows our inability to boldly trust in Him who shows unfathomable mercy to people who are on the margins of life, living on the edge of society, feeling like they don't fit in, not knowing what to do with the sin-filled guilt that eats away at their hearts, minds, bodies, and souls like a flesh-eating disease. *He knows you. He knows your condition*. And he still listens to your cries for mercy.

During one of our Divine Service settings that we use on Sunday morning, there is a part in the liturgy where we echo this cry for mercy together as God's people. And that cry comes at a peculiar place in our liturgy. It occurs toward the beginning of our Divine Service, right after we had confessed our sins together and received God's sure Word of forgiveness. Shortly after we receive that Word of forgiveness, we cry together a cry of mercy to our God in a song we call the *Kyrie*, which, in Greek, means “O Lord.” We cry to him to give us mercy and attend to all our congregation's needs.

So in the Divine Service on Sunday morning there we are, the baptized people of God, standing on the edge of confessing our sins and receiving a Word of healing, and we cry for mercy, entrusting every need, to our God who hears and answers.

And there is only one person whom we thank for hearing our cries and answering in mercy. He is the one who first traveled to Jerusalem for us. The one who saw our weakness. The one who heard the cries of his people for mercy and came to give grace and help in time of need. He came to be the one on the margins for us. He came to take the disease of sin upon himself. He bore it all as an answer to your cry. As an answer for the cries of the whole world.

And so now that question, “How well do we know the one to whom all thanks is due?” should drive us evermore to our God. It drives us to see and believe more firmly that thanksgiving is greater than a day. It is more than preparing the perfect meal and getting along with relatives and going around a table to name off a few things for which we are thankful. It is about *knowing more and more the one to whom all thanks is given*. And as we grow in that kind of knowledge and relationship with our God, something

incredible happens. Our whole life becomes transformed into a life of thanksgiving to God that we live in Christ and in his Spirit. We live this life in worship and in regular study and devotion of his Word, yes, to be sure. But also, we live this transformed life of thanksgiving as one who shows Christ-like love and mercy to others just as he has given it and continues to give it to you. Now we have the privilege to take time to ask and see what the needs are of those around you. What are the needs of your mother or father, brother or sister, husband or wife, granddaughter or grandson, neighbor or coworker, or fellow parishioner? What do they need you to do? How do they need you to act? How can Christ meet those needs through you as a vessel of his mercy?

It all starts as we come to know more and more the one to whom all thanks is given. As we do, we come to know the depth of his love and mercy more and more. And knowing him and his mercy God works within us daily to respond with a life of thanksgiving filled with acts of love and mercy.

I already brought to our attention one song that we sing in the liturgy. We call it the *Kyrie*. At the edge of confession and absolution we cry together to our God for mercy, continually living in it. There is another song that we sing in our liturgy that I would like to bring your attention this evening. We sing it on certain Sundays after we receive Communion. It is called, "Thank the Lord" (LSB 181). After receiving the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ together in the bread and the wine, we turn and, like that one leper, we offer our live in thanksgiving to our God of mercy, the one to whom all thanks is due. Let us conclude by singing that now. And let us take that song with us into our Thanksgiving Day celebrations tomorrow and every day. **Sing "Thank the Lord" from LSB, pg. 181.** Amen.