

Wednesday, November 23, 2022 – Eve of the Day of National Thanksgiving

Luke 17:11-19 (ESV) – “Give Thanks Like a Samaritan Leper”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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

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 and lifted up their voices, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” When He saw them He said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went they were cleansed. 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. Now he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” And He said to him, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.” Thus far our text.

Do you get emails like the ones that I get? The ones that try to elicit money for this or that worthy cause, using the tugging at the heartstrings that’s so common during this “Holiday Season”? We don’t know if this or that charity is on the up-and-up; we even hear that those who are holding signs at the freeway exits are paid by big corporate kingpins that take a percentage of whatever they’re able to gain out of a day standing there and asking. We get jaded by the fact that we’re more than likely to throw good money after bad, and we might not have enough to help those that we come across that are truly in need. But, when that actually

happens, would we be generous, even then? If we had someone sitting here in this congregation, either passing through town or having been in our midst for years, would we be generous? Or, would we think that we've worked hard for what we've been given; would we allow someone else to be the one that helps them out.

Even though we'd like to think that we are giving, helpful people, the fact remains that most of us actually aren't. Our text for this evening doesn't deal with handing out money, but rather the healing from sickness and disease. However, the concept is the same – we don't want to get involved; we don't want to get our hands dirty; we don't want to bring this sickness home to our families and friends.

Leprosy, even though it's largely been rendered treatable today, was a lonely death sentence in Jesus' day. It's still not a disease we'd want to have; there is life-long, time-dependent treatment that can be expensive, time-consuming and frustrating. In Jesus' day, there was no cure; it led to horrible sores and a skin disease that literally melted the skin from the body. Because there was no cure, the direction from the priests, who were the spiritual as well as the medical experts of the day, was to ostracize and isolate the person until they were no longer exhibiting symptoms. This wasn't going to happen! They would live in lonely places, barely surviving until their bodies either succumbed to the disease, or they got an infection from their exposed sores. What else were they going to do? They had to protect the rest of the people from being infected. It just didn't make sense to expose everyone for the benefit of a few. Anyone who had contact with a leprous person, or even drew near to them, would be painted with the same brush – unclean. That's why they stayed at a distance from Jesus, and warned anyone who approached them to stay away by yelling out, "UNCLEAN! UNCLEAN!"

Thanks be to God that Jesus' reaction was different from the rest of the people, and even us today – He approached them, dealt with them, and didn't write them off. He did this healing for a couple of different purposes. First, to show His power over sin and death, disease and woe. He was and is God Almighty, with the power to heal and fix all of the ills that afflict us in this sinful world. Second, He did it to show His compassion for us His children, no matter what befalls us in this life. He showed mercy to the lepers, and didn't allow them to suffer something that happened to them because of sin – not necessarily their sin, but the sinful nature of mankind, which clings to all of us like glue. It's because of sin that disease and sickness, death and destruction are a part of this world – it wasn't part of God's original plan.

This healing is what Jesus specializes in – showing mercy to us sinful creatures, especially when we sin against Him. Even when we don't help out others in our path, He forgives us, and urges us to be more mindful of them, next time they cross our path. He doesn't call us to be patsies, but also not to be so jaded that we can't see the suffering that he might have given us the means to alleviate. This is part of reflecting the love that He has shown to us back to others. It might not materialize into a "conversion experience", but it might also break the cycle of being ignored and ostracized that those who are "down on their luck" often experience. This may prompt them to ask why we are different, and respond in a more loving way than the world around us. We are then empowered to speak the reason for the love that proceeds out of us- we are loved by God, shown mercy by Him. Solomon called it a discerning heart; others call it wisdom. Either way, we are promised, just like God's people of old, that if we ask Him for this knowledge, He will grant it unconditionally, just like He does every other spiritual blessing in Christ.

Jesus makes a lot of hay about the man who returned to give thanks to God being a foreigner – why does He do this? Probably this man was the least likely person to become a believer – after all, these were the folks that the Israelites were supposed to have killed when the Israelites took possession of the Promised Land of Canaan. They weren't the highest people on the social ladder, and hadn't exhibited much in the way of saving faith in the Redeemer! It would be kind of like the drug kingpin standing on the corner not being the most likely person we'd think to be receptive or understand that the love of God in Christ Jesus was at work here. Jesus focuses on the other nine to show us how we are not to act, but at the same time reminding us that this is our natural tendency. He's showing the Law to us, how we have failed to measure up to His righteous standard every day.

It's not just the bum on the street; it's us in need of God's grace and mercy. We sin against God by thought, word and deed – everything we do or think or say is tainted by the disease of sin. Even though the disease of sin isn't as apparent on the outside as something like leprosy, it destroys us just the same, except from the inside out. We can go through life thinking that everything is just fine, and it might look that way on the outside, but inside beats the heart of a sinner. Luther lamented that no matter how much he tried to keep the Law of God, that sinful heart kept messing with his intentions if not his deeds. When it comes to the kingdom of heaven, we are just as much a foreigner as the Samaritan was in the land of Israel – we are cut off from God, not deserving of God's attention whatsoever.

The Day of National Thanksgiving, which we celebrate tomorrow, has been on the books forever, it seems. Maybe it's a symptom of our sinful nature that we need to be reminded of this failure to be generous to others by having a day where everything stops for a short while,

to jar us back to the reality of our situation. It's not just a day to take off from work, overeat and watch some football (although, there is a place for this rest and relaxation – especially for the football part – I digress!) Every day should be a day of thanksgiving – for what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. He has taken us from the valley of sin and death and hell that we deserve, and placed us on the mountaintop of His grace and mercy. He has given us everything that we have and everything that we are – we would have nothing except for Him. We'd be DEAD in our trespasses and sins. We wouldn't be making the decision whether or not to help our brother that was in trouble; we'd be the ones in trouble – eternally.

We must also remember that it's not even in our power to decide to give thanks to God – this is motivated by the Holy Spirit working within us. He urges us to follow God's plan for our lives – to be thankful, generous, and reach out with His love. Not because we're trying to earn points to get us into heaven, but because of what He's done for each one of us. He's cured the leprosy of our souls, folks – cleansed us and made us whiter than snow, through His perfect water of Baptism and His body and blood eaten and consumed in the Supper. He has truly done everything for our salvation. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.