

“Learning to Give Thanks”

Giving thanks is not always a given. Parents know this quite well, as they teach their children to give thanks when they have received something. “Now what do you say?” they prompt – and they say, “thank you.” This evening – as we listen to the healing of the ten lepers – we too are being instructed on how to give thanks.

One can only imagine what it was like to live life as a leper. In addition to the pain and discomfort of the disease – there was the isolation. In the Old Testament we are told that the leper had to live outside the camp because they were considered unclean. Outside the camp – cut off from family and friends – and exposed to the threats of the wilderness.

In the New Testament, lepers are still pictured as outcasts. In fact, if someone came too close to them, the leper was required to yell – “unclean, unclean” – and make sure there was appropriate social distancing. That’s why, here in our text, they “stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.’”

And from a distance Jesus says, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” This is what one would normally do AFTER they were healed. The lepers going to the priests is a sign of faith – and on their way, believing, they were healed. From a distance, Jesus heals and restores the unclean by His Word. His Word IS Spirit and Life – it wounds and it heals.

No doubt all ten of the lepers healed that day were grateful. Think about it. They’re walking along the road and notice that their leprosy is gone. I’m sure they were thankful in their hearts to Jesus who answered their cry for mercy and healed them – I’m sure they were overwhelmed with gratitude as they showed themselves to the priests and were welcomed back into their homes and community.

But only one of them broke rank with his friends. Only one turned around as the rest headed down the road. Only one of them fell down on his face at Jesus' feet, giving thanks. And the fact that he was a Samaritan spices up the story even more.

Jesus is both disappointed and pleased. "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then He praises the faith that not only called to Jesus in its time of need – but came back to say thank you. "Rise and go your way; your faith has [literally] saved you."

Ten lepers had faith to cry out to Jesus, their Master, to have mercy on them. Only one had faith to return and fall down at His feet to give thanks.

You see, giving thanks is more than taking inventory of your blessings – thinking thankful thoughts – and feeling gratitude in your heart. Giving thanks involves the whole person.

It's turning on the road – breaking away and going upstream from the crowd. Giving thanks often involves being inconvenienced – setting aside your plans. Giving thanks is "giving credit where credit is due" – bowing down in humility before Jesus and praising God with a loud voice.

As I said at the beginning – we need some instruction in giving thanks to God. We do, from time to time, step back and realize the blessings the Lord has bestowed on us – but our natural response is to think that He now requires something from us in return.

Our sinful hearts think in terms of measurements, counting, keeping score. And we are certainly behind in the score – God giving us more than we desire, deserve, or give thanks for.

That is not the way of Christ. Notice what happens when the leper returns to give thanks to Jesus. Jesus gives him another blessing. He commends him saying, "Rise and go your way; your faith has saved you."

Thanksgiving is an act of worship – it's a liturgical event – calling upon the name of the Lord – bowing down. The Samaritan praised God in a loud voice. He fell down at the feet of Jesus – He prostrated himself – with his face touching the ground. This is much more than having a moment of reflection during halftime while reclining in the Lazy Boy. This is whole body worship – because Jesus is the Savior of the whole person.

He heals the leper – and saves the sinner. He absorbs your disease, your sin, your death into His body. He goes to Jerusalem to die on a cross so that the Samaritan may live – so that you and I may live.

He frees the leper from his bondage to disease and restores him to his community. He frees you from the leprosy of sin and restores you to community as a reborn child of God. He has mercy on all who call on His name – and for this, we say, thank you.

God is a giving God – and He delights to give gifts to His children. The highest form of thanksgiving is to RECEIVE salvation. Without the gift of salvation, all the other gifts don't amount to anything – wealth, health, work, friends, family – all these can be gone in an instant. But salvation, eternal life – the fruit of the forgiveness of sins – last forever. It's the only thing that matters in the end.

God gives us everything needed for the support of body and life. He brings us to faith, baptizes us, feeds us, and saves us from death. The ultimate way of giving thanks is to continue to receive what He promises and offers – His mercy to us, in Christ.

In one sense, the popular notion of Thanksgiving Day, is on track – giving thanks involves eating and drinking – eating and drinking God's salvation! Eating the bread that is the Body of Christ – true and living Bread come down from heaven. Drinking the cup that is the Blood of Christ – cleansing us from sin and restoring us to our Father.

That's why the Lord's Supper is called the Eucharist – which means, "giving thanks." Thanksgiving flows from the altar, the Lord's Table – and returns to it. It begins and ends in the Eucharist, the Lord's thanksgiving meal of His own Body and Blood. It begins and ends in the Liturgy, where God's people call upon the Name of the Lord and receive His gifts.

It is good that you took a detour and gathered here this evening – for Jesus, our Master, meets us here – to cleanse us, restore us – to forgive all our sins, and with it, life without end. Indeed, so much to be thankful for – receiving His gifts and saying, “thank you.” Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.