

SECOND READING: Luke 17:11-19

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¹¹Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy^[a] met him. They stood at a distance ¹³and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"

¹⁴When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed.

¹⁵One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. ¹⁶He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.

¹⁷Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?"¹⁸Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?"¹⁹Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

In this season of gratitude, open our eyes to the gifts, unmerited, all around us, the gift of this new day, of family and friends and people to love; the gift of this quiet time together. Surprise us with your truth through these words and your love in Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Psalms 100

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Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.

²Worship the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.

³Know that the LORD is God.

It is he that made us, and we are his;^[a]
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

⁴Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

⁵For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

Giving Thanks

A poem by Wendell Berry: *It is late November, Thanksgiving, and the slow rain falls as all day it has fallen. The mists drift in the tree tops. The ewe flock grazes the green slope as in a dream of a painting. There is no wind. It is completely quiet. From the distance comes only the sound of the branch flowing in its wooded hollow...and man giving his thanks.*¹

I love Thanksgiving. I love it because the air is cool and the autumn colors vibrant. I love the smells of those once-a-year foods wafting in the air: pumpkin pie, turkey dressing, candied yams. I love the day because once the dishes are done, it's usually quiet and restful spent with family, friends and football. (Note: you can tell I'm NOT one of those who gets out early for the Black Friday sales). I love the simple and important truths lifted up on Thanksgiving day too...the goodness of the fertile earth, and the bonds of trust which can connect people of all classes and races gathered in church halls and civic centers everywhere. I love it all, but maybe, maybe I love Thanksgiving most because on this day we, as a whole people, as a nation, lift up the practice of gratitude, of giving thanks.

And saying "thank you" IS so important. It is important for many reasons including of course, the fact that it makes our bodies healthier. It improves our sleep, decreases depression, boosts immunity and lowers stress.² Even Oprah affirms it. But giving thanks may also do such important things as simply making us just more human.³ *I like the story told by Joanna Adams of a man who was eating in a crowded restaurant. The empty seat at his table was the only one in the whole place. A waiter asked if he would mind having someone join him at his table. The man said, 'no', and a stranger came over. The two of them sat silently until their food arrived. When it did, the fellow who had been there originally bowed his head to say a silent blessing. The other man asked him, "Excuse me, but do you have a headache?" The man answered, "No, I must thank God before I eat." "Oh, you are one of those," said the other man. "Me? I never give thanks; I earn what I get by my smarts and the sweat of my brow. I don't say thank*

¹ Wendell Berry. In: "Given" (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint;2005), 133.

² Oprah. "Who (or What) do you need to thank?" In: O. The Oprah Magazine. Nov 2018; Vol 11, pg 104.

³ Joanna Adams."Say Grace". http://day1.org/6335-joanna_adams_say_grace.print (accessed 11/12/2018).

*you to anybody. I just start right in.” “Well, then, you are just like my dog,” said the first man. “He does exactly the same thing when food is put before him.”*⁴

Yes, giving thanks may actually make us more human. The first question in the Westminster Catechisms asks, “*What is the chief end of mankind?* Do you remember the answer? The answer is: “*to glorify God and enjoy God forever.*”⁵ Nothing else matters for us humans more than to give thanks and praise our Creator. The psalmists of long ago certainly seemed to know this. Listen again to the familiar words of Psalm 100 which were read for us this morning: “*Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.*” The psalmists lived close to the earth, understood that all they saw around them, the mountains and valleys, the green fields, decorated with flowers and blooming trees, the arid and windy deserts, the stars in the clear night skies, the creatures that populated the land, the seas, the air...all of this revealed the nature of their Creator and their position in relation to the Creator, as the Created. This made them first to stand in awe, and then it made them fall to their knees in gratitude.⁶ Karl Barth echoed what these psalmists were expressing. He said, “The basic human response to God is gratitude---not fear and trembling, not guilt and dread, but in one’s soul, thanksgiving. “*What else can we say to the hopeful peace God gives us but to stammer praise?*”⁷ Beautiful.

Being so overflowing with the fullness of God, that we must, that we are compelled to respond to God with thanksgiving, stammering with praise, is at the heart of our faith. In fact, in fact...in the story in Luke that we read this morning as well, it is when the One, the healed leper, came back to offer **thanks** to Jesus, that a great change happened. You see in biblical times leprosy was the most dreaded of diseases. Actually, the term, leprosy included a variety of skin conditions from which people not only suffered physically but socially. This is because in addition to being thought highly contagious, leprosy was considered punishment for sin.

⁴Joanna Adams. “Say Grace”. http://day1.org/6335-joanna_adams_say_grace.print (accessed 11/12/2018).

⁵ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part I, Book of Confessions* (Louisville KY: Geneva Press, 2004)

⁶John Buchanan. “Thanksgiving” <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2001/112011.html> (accessed 11/10/2018).

⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/3 (Edinburgh T&T Clark, 1960), 564.

Lepers were labeled as ritually unclean. No one could touch them without being themselves unclean. Lepers were usually banished to live outside of town, excluded from the synagogue, required to beg from afar, to wear torn garments or wear a bell if ever in public. Lepers were feared, rejected, avoided, and condemned until a priest pronounced them clean again. The story goes that ten lepers approached Jesus. From a distance they called out for Jesus to have mercy on them. He told them to go and see the priest, and, of course, we know that on their way, their disease miraculously, disappeared. Luke 17:15: *“Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, **turned back**, praising God with a loud voice. He fell at Jesus’ feet and **thanked** him.”* The NRSV translates Jesus’ response to this, *“Your faith has made you well,”* Other translations say, *“Your faith has saved you.”* Regardless of the translation, what was said was huge. The nine were healed, but this man, who expressed his gratitude was more than healed. His gratitude made him whole. Giving thanks did something to him that made him more than he was before. And this is the crux of it all, friends. This is the take-away this morning. Through Christ, the leper was not only healed of his physical disease and low social status, but his life and faith were redirected.⁸ He was made COMPLETE because he gave thanks.

And so, giving thanks is then even more IMPORTANT than what makes us healthy and what more “human”. It is part and parcel of our “Yes” to God. It is part of our commitment to live in response to God’s gift of unconditional love. It is part of our living out the fullest expression of our salvation. It is part of the new life promised in Christ. I cannot but help think this is what the pilgrims were doing when they set aside that first Thanksgiving Day in 1620, can’t you? Only 51 of the 102 original Mayflower pilgrims lived through their first winter. All of them would have died had it not been for the kindness of the Native Americans who taught them how to farm in strange soil. There they were, fleeing religious persecution, doing battle against the elements, disease, the threat of starvation yet they were compelled to praise God, to give thanks and live their new lives fully with joy in the abundant grace of God.

⁸ Margit Ernt-Habib, “Theological Perspective on Luke 17:11-19” in *Feasting on the Word*, Yr C, Vol 4, eds, David L. Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 166.

I recently read some magnificent words by the theologian, Louis Smedes, which he evidently wrote on his deathbed. *“I have learned that gratitude is the best feeling I have ever had. It is better than winning the lottery, better than watching my daughter graduate from college, better and deeper than any other feeling. It is perhaps the genesis of all good feelings in the human repertoire. I am sure that nothing in life can ever match the feeling of being held by a gracious energy percolating from the abyss where beats the loving heart of God.....So close to death, I am grateful and experiencing the unbearable goodness of being alive.”*⁹

Friends, we have so many blessings for which to be grateful, but maybe one of the greatest ones is that our nation has a day that is set aside for us as a whole people, to lift up the practice of giving thanks. *“Then One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him.”* HAPPY THANKSGIVING. Amen.

⁹Smedes. *St. Paul Journey*. St. Paul Lutheran Church newsletter, Davenport, IA 25 Feb 2000. In: JoAnna Adams. *“The Main Thing*. <http://www.fouthchurch.org/sermons.2002/112802.html>. (accessed 11/12/2018).