

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."

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.

“Saying ‘Thank You’”

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 of the river flowing in its wooded hollow...and of a man giving his thanks.*¹

Ah, I love Thanksgiving. I love that the air has cooled and the trees are beginning to turn. The smells of those once-a-year foods waft in the air: pumpkin pie, turkey (brisket at our house), sweet potatoes. Once the dishes are done, I love that it is usually a quiet and restful day, spent with family, friends and maybe football. Simple and important truths too are lifted up on Thanksgiving...the goodness of the fertile earth, and the bonds of trust which can connect people of all classes and races who gather to feast together. Yes, I love so many things about Thanksgiving, but maybe, maybe what I love the most is that on this day we, since Abraham Lincoln declared it a national holiday in 1864, we, as a whole people, we, 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 and immunity. It decreases headaches, depression, anxiety, GI problems, blood pressure.² Many scientific studies conclude what CS Lewis famously said, “Praise, is almost inner health made audible.”³

But giving thanks may also simply make us just more....well, human.⁴ *I like the story told by one of my previous pastors, Rev. 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, ‘oh, of course not’, 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*

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

² Ron Shank. “The Mental Health of Giving Thanks.” <https://www.brooklane.org/blog/mental-health-benefits-giving-thanks#:~:text=Studies%20have%20shown%20that%20people,your%20mind%2C%20body%20and%20spirit..> (accessed 11-17-23).

³ C. S. Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms (orig., 1958; 1986), 94-95.

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

*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 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."*⁵

Yes, giving thanks may actually make us more human. The first question in the Westminster Catechisms asks, *"What is the chief end of mankind?"* The answer is: *"to glorify God and enjoy God forever."*⁶ Nothing else matters for us humans more than to give thanks and praise to our Creator. The psalmists of long ago knew this. Listen again to the 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."* The psalmists lived close to the earth and understood that all they saw around them revealed the nature of their Creator...the mountains jutting high above valleys cut by flowing streams and rivers, fields decorated with grazing sheep, flowers and blooming trees, and arid, windy deserts, which at night, showed the stars to be so big and bright that it seemed they could reach out and touch them...yes, it all revealed their Creator's character, and it affirmed their position as well, the created. This made them fall to their knees in praise and gratitude.⁷ Thousands of years later, Walter Brueggemann echoed their expressions when he said, *"We have a resilient hunger to move beyond self, to return our energy and our worth to the One from whom it has been granted. In our return to that One, we find our deepest joy."*⁸ And Karl Barth said, *"What else can we say to the hopeful peace God gives us but to stammer praise?"*⁹

Being so overflowing with the fullness of God, that we are compelled to respond to God with thanksgiving, stammering praise, is at the heart of our faith. It was what the woman who anointed Jesus with perfume was acting out, and it was what the one healed leper was doing in

⁵Joanna Adams. "Say Grace". http://day1.org/6335-joanna_adams_say_grace.print (accessed 11/12/2018).

⁶ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part I, Book of Confessions* (Louisville KY: Geneva Press, 2004)

⁷John Buchanan. "Thanksgiving" <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2001/112011.html> (accessed 11/10/2018).

⁸ Walter Brueggemann. "Israel's Praise" (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; 1988), 1-2.

⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/3 (Edinburgh T&T Clark, 1960), 564.

the story that we read this morning too. The leper came back to offer **thanks** to Jesus..... and that was when a great change happened.

You see, in biblical times leprosy was a dreaded disease, 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. Lepers were labeled as ritually unclean. No one could touch them without being unclean themselves. Lepers were banished to live outside of town, excluded from the synagogue, required to beg from afar, to wear a bell if ever in public. Lepers were condemned until a priest pronounced them clean again.

The story goes that 10 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. *“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,”* which is interesting, because it emphasizes that what was happening 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 for us the crux of it all, friends! Through Christ, the leper was not only healed of his physical and social pain, but his life and faith were redirected...for eternity, they were redirected.¹⁰ He was made COMPLETE because he gave thanks. And so...saying “thank you” 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 can’t help but think that this is what the pilgrims were doing when they set aside that first Thanksgiving Day in 1620. 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

¹⁰ 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.

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 say, “thank you” and live their lives fully with joy in the abundant grace of God.

I will end with great words from the theologian, Louis Smedes, which he 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.”*¹¹

Friends, we have SO much for which to be grateful, but maybe one of the greatest is that our nation’s forefathers have done a great thing. They have set aside a day 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.

¹¹Smedes. *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).