

October 8, 2023
Luke 17:11-19

Thanksgiving Sunday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The Blessings of Gratitude”

“Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

During my childhood, there were three items the sight of which filled my heart with dread: brussels sprouts, a dust rag, and thank you notes. My distaste for brussels sprouts is something I have shared frequently; they are still the one vegetable that I will always pass up at Thanksgiving dinner. Whenever I saw the dust rag, it meant that it was time for my least favourite household chore, an example of how having long arms is not always an advantage. But it was when I saw the thank you notes on the table, I knew that it was time to fulfill an obligation that my parents enforced whenever I received a gift, including Christmas and my birthday. There were times when writing thank you notes was not that arduous of a task; when I got a new toy or something I really wanted, I was quite eager to express my thanks to the person who gave me this most-desired gift. But when I got a present that I did not find terribly exciting (like clothes), I had to muster all my strength to find words to express thanks for an item for which I was not particularly thankful. But looking back, I understand why my parents insisted that I not only say thanks but write thank you notes when I received a gift; giving thanks for gifts or acts of kindness is an important lesson for children so that they appreciate the efforts of others and do not grow up believing that they are entitled to whatever is bestowed on them. Teaching gratitude to children in the early years of their lives can be important in helping them develop skills that they will need to be successful later in life:

- “Research shows that thankful people are usually more optimistic. They’re also less depressed and stressed. So, when we teach our children to appreciate what they have, and what others do for them, we are helping them become happier, healthier adults.” – “First Things First” podcast.

Giving thanks is also an important lesson for us to teach our children as Christians; giving thanks as God’s people reminds us that all we have is a gracious blessing from God, and that our response to all of God’s blessings is to thank the Lord and commit ourselves to serving God and others in humble response to God’s blessing. In the *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther teaches that God showers all the blessings we need for daily living upon us “*out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all this I owe it to God to thank*

and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.” As we gather at the Lord’s Table to receive the gift of Holy Communion (which is also known as the Eucharist, from the word meaning “thanksgiving”) we acknowledge that *“it is indeed right, our duty and our joy, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks and praise to you, almighty and merciful God, through our Saviour Jesus Christ.”* As we join with people across Canada for this National Day of Thanksgiving, we heed to teachings of St. Paul that we should *“rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”* (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). Gratitude reminds us of the gracious goodness of God that we experience every day; gratitude also opens our hearts and minds to the grace of God that is beyond imagining, grace that is as limitless as the “wideness of God’s mercy.”

Today’s Gospel lesson teaches us how gratitude for blessings we have received from God opens us to blessings that are *“abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine”* (Ephesians 3:20). Luke’s account of the healing of the *“ten men who had leprosy”* (17:12, NIV) turns once again to the theme of God’s mercy and salvation. It occurs *“on the way to Jerusalem [as] Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee”* (17:11). This border region is a fitting location for a story that will involve both Jews and Samaritans, two peoples whose relationship was conflicted and at times violent. Jesus’ presence in this border region and his willingness to heal people from both regions is yet another sign that our Jesus intends that his ministry will be for all people; as he instructs his disciples moments before his ascension, *“you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8).

- “At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus extends his mission beyond the boundaries of his homeland. He reminds the assembly ‘there were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian’ (Luke 4:27). In response his townspeople seek to throw Jesus over a cliff (Luke 4:30). It can be difficult to accept the welcoming ways of God.” – Audrey West.

• It is as Jesus enters a village that ten persons with leprosy approach him. Luke reports that *“keeping their distance, they called out, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’”* (17:13). According to the Torah, any person with a leprous disease (which at the time included a wide variety of skin conditions, including psoriasis) was required to live “outside the camp” and cry out “unclean, unclean” whenever anyone approached them:

- “Command the Israelites to put out of the camp everyone who is leprous, or has a discharge, and everyone who is unclean through contact with a corpse; you shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp; they must not defile their camp, where I dwell among them.” – Numbers 5:2-3.
- “The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be dishevelled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.” – Leviticus 13:45-46.

If a person with leprosy were fortunate enough to recover, a priest had to certify that the person was clean before he or she could return to the community (*“On the eighth day he shall bring him for his cleansing to the priest, to the entrance to the tent of meeting, before the LORD”* (Leviticus 14:23)).

This is not the first time that Jesus confronts a person with leprosy in Luke; the Evangelist had earlier reported that *“once, when he was in one of the cities, there was a man covered with leprosy”* (5:12). When the man sees Jesus, he bowed his face to the ground and begged him *“Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.”* In response, *“Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, ‘I do choose. Be made clean.’ Immediately the leprosy left him.”* (5:13). In contrast, when Jesus sees the ten men with leprosy and hears their cries for mercy, he does not pronounce healing, nor does he touch them. Instead, he instructs them to *“go and show yourselves to the priests”* (17:14) in accordance with the teaching of the Torah. It is while they respond in obedience to Jesus’ command that the miracle occurs: *“and as they went, they were made clean.”* It is *“in their act of obedient faith that their healing takes place”* (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri).

While this story is usually entitled “The Healing of the Ten Lepers,” the point of the story is not the healing but the response of those who were touched by God’s mercy. While it is through their act of obedience that all are healed, one of the ten responds differently from the others: *“when he saw that he was healed, [he] turned back, praising God with a loud voice”* (17:15). At first, this healed man does not return to thank Jesus but to glorify God (like the response of Naaman the Syrian when he is cleansed of his leprous disease: *“Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant”* – 2 Kings 5:15). The healed man’s reaction also conveys an implicit Christology: he recognizes that God has acted through Jesus, and he offers praise to God. Glorifying God is a common response to manifestations of God’s saving work in Luke:

- “The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” – 2:20.
- “Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, ‘We have seen strange things today.’” – 5:25-26.
- “Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, ‘A great prophet has risen among us!’ and ‘God has looked favourably on his people!’” – 7:16.

After glorifying God for his healing, the man “*prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him*” (17:16), marking the intensity of the man’s gratitude. Luke then adds another important detail about this one person who returned to praise God and give thanks to Jesus for his healing: “*he was a Samaritan.*” Like the “good” Samaritan in Jesus’ parable (10:29-37, found only in Luke), “*God’s mercy is not limited by human conventions regarding insiders and outsiders – even when the outsider is an enemy.*” (West).

In his response to the Samaritan’s act of glorifying God and praising our Lord in response to his healing, Jesus asks a series of three questions that are not addressed to the grateful Samaritan but underscore the point of the story. His first question is “*were not ten made clean?*” (17:17); all ten were healed, not only the one who returned. Jesus then asks, “*but the other nine, where are they?*” Were they so caught up in their good fortune that they failed to see God’s hand in their healing? Finally, Jesus asks, “*was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?*” (17:18). The proper response to God’s saving mercy is not presumption that it is something we deserve, but “*untainted gratitude and pure praise of God for God’s saving mercy*” (M. Eugene Boring). While the other nine healed persons were obedient to both the Torah and Jesus’ command when they went and showed themselves to the priests, the Samaritan’s response is another sign of how the act of returning and praising God frame Luke’s Gospel, “*suggesting a road map for our response to God’s activity in the world.*” (West).

Jesus’ final act in the story is to turn and address the Samaritan who has returned to praise God and to thank Jesus in response to his healing: “*Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.*” (17:19). The man’s faith was not expressed by his request for help but by his gratitude and praise of God. The other nine were healed, but only this one received God’s declaration of salvation. The faith that has “*made you well*” (literally “*saved you*”) is a gift that goes beyond physical healing to the assurance of salvation and eternal life through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Those who are healed of physical illnesses will one day die, as will all

human beings, but the good news at the heart of Christianity is that not even death “*will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” (Romans 8:39). The other nine “*got what they wanted, but this one received more than he had dreamed of asking for.*” (Boring).

The story of the healing of the ten persons with leprosy and the response of the Samaritan is not only a lesson in the importance of giving thanks for God’s blessings; it also shows us how when we return to God with thankful hearts, we also come into the presence of God who desires to shower blessings beyond imagining upon us. We are called to give thanks and praise to God not only for the specific blessings we have received out of God’s gracious and generous goodness and mercy, but for our very lives and all that we enjoy each day as God’s beloved children:

- “Gratitude is not about stuff. Gratitude is an emotional response to the surprise of our very existence, to sensing that inner light and realizing the astonishing sacred, social, and scientific events that brought each one of us into being ... All we experience is radically contingent on a single gift – life.”
– Diana Butler Bass.

When we gather at our family tables for Thanksgiving dinner, we often call to mind the blessings we have received and the good things that we enjoy. But celebrating Thanksgiving – or any celebratory occasion – is not always easy for someone who has suffered the death of a loved one, or is undergoing a serious illness, or is battling depression or living amid overwhelming despair. When we cannot see any reason to give thanks to God, we may wonder what Paul had in mind when the apostle encouraged his readers that “*with everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God*” (Philippians 4:6). But far from being the teaching of a person who had lived a charmed life, these are the words of an apostle who had suffered greatly for the sake of his Gospel ministry (and who would be martyred for his witness to the good news of Jesus Christ) but who could still teach others that no matter how difficult or challenging one’s circumstances may be, we can still give thanks and praise to God because of our assurance of God’s steadfast, loving presence even in the darkest hours of our life, and that like the Samaritan we have the assurance that through our faith in Jesus Christ and our giving thanks to God in all circumstances that we will receive blessings far beyond anything we could imagine, including the assurance of eternal life in the presence of our Lord who assures us of that day when “*death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away*” (Revelation 21:4).

- “To be grateful for the good things that happen in our lives is easy, but to be grateful for all our lives – the good as well as the bad, the moments of joy as well as the moments of sorrow, the successes as well as the failures, the rewards as well as the rejections – that requires hard spiritual work. Still, we are only truly grateful people when we can say thank you to all that has brought us to the present moment. As long as we keep dividing our lives between events and people we would like to remember and those we would rather forget, we cannot claim the fullness of our beings as a gift of God to be grateful for.” – Henri Nouwen.

Twenty-four years ago, I found myself struggling with giving thanks to God as I was suddenly thrust into the “*valley of the shadow of death.*” Less than two weeks before our celebration of American Thanksgiving, my father died suddenly. We gathered at my aunt and uncle’s house for a delicious Thanksgiving feast, but all I could think of was the empty chair that my father had occupied for every Thanksgiving of my life. How could I give thanks to God when I was in mourning of a life so suddenly taken from us? I struggled with this question until a few weeks after Thanksgiving when I was preparing to lead a funeral service for a person in my congregation. As I met with the grieving family while still consumed with my own grief, one of the Bible readings that we selected struck me in a new way; it was the words of Lamentations, the mourning cries of the people of Israel amid their own devastating losses, that spoke of how we might be able to give thanks to God when giving thanks seemed to be impossible: “*But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*” (Lamentations 3:21-23). As the Samaritan received the gift of salvation that gave him both “*strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,*” God’s Word of hope gives us the strength to give thanks in all circumstances, because we live in the comfort of a holy and certain hope that God is with us always, that “*grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.*”

- “Faith, like gratitude, is our response to the grace of God as we have experienced it. For those who have become aware of God’s grace, all of life is infused with a sense of gratitude, and each encounter becomes an opportunity to see and to respond in the spirit of the grateful leper.” – Culpepper.

I still do not care for brussels sprouts, and dusting is still one of my least favourite chores; but my parents’ insistence that I write thank you notes is a lesson that has stuck with me through all the stages of my life. Even though my handwriting has

become increasingly illegible, offering thanks to those who have extended kindness to me is a way to show my appreciation and to remind me that my life depends on others and the blessings they extend to me. Giving thanks is central to our lives as members of families and communities and especially as members of the community of faith that is the Church of Jesus Christ, to whom we return to give thanks and praise for the blessings that are ours each day and the blessings that await us when our Lord returns and gathers us together into our eternal home. May we as God's people continue at all times and in all places to offer our thanks and praise to God, *"for the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations."* (Psalm 100:5).

Amen.