

November 24, 2021 – Luke 17:11-19 (Thanksgiving Eve)

I think just about every person in America has done it at least once in their lives. They've gathered around the table for Thanksgiving. Family members all around. An unnaturally large, steaming mountain of poultry sitting in the middle of the table. Enough side dishes to feed an army battalion. Pies cooling in the kitchen, one entire pie for every person.

And as the entire table braces like sprinters at the starting line to dive into this gluttonous feast, somebody puts up their hand, clears their throat, and says, to the dismay of everyone, "I think we should go around the table and say what we're thankful for this year." So much for hot turkey.

Now, really, the tradition is innocuous enough. I'm not criticizing it in any way. In fact, it can be a great way for families to bond over their joys of the past year. Although, that's not true for everyone. There was one year in particular when my aunt decided to use the time to say a Native American earth prayer and then disparage the pilgrims for stealing the Indian's land. But that's beside the point.

Most of the time, though, it's a helpful, well-established tradition of giving thanks, that gives extra meaning to the holiday. But I was thinking recently about what I would say this year and comparing it to previous years. In the past, my thanks would have been focused on things like a good marriage. A loving family. A safe home. A supportive congregation.

But living through a pandemic kinda puts things into perspective, doesn't it? Oh, I know, the risk of me actually dying from COVID are pretty small. But still... over 5,000,000 people have died, worldwide. Almost 800,000 in the United States alone. That makes you appreciate your life just a little bit more.

The confirmands and I were just discussing the First Article of the Apostles' Creed this past week. The very first thing we recognize in the explanation to it is, "I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them." Why did he give me this? "Only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me." And what is my only response? "For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him."

Which is why we are gathered here this evening. To thank and praise, serve and obey Him. To thank and praise, serve and obey Him just as those men with leprosy should have. But didn't. Because they had every reason to give Jesus their thanks and praise.

Today, leprosy is a well-defined illness, also known as Hansen's disease, caused by a very specific type of bacteria. But what we see in the Bible may or may not actually be leprosy as we know it now. The ancient word used was translated as "leprosy" in the King James and just stuck. There were dozens of skin disorders and infections that occurred as a result of poor hygiene and sanitation during the Old and New Testament times, any number of which could have been the case here.

So these men have a skin disease. One that looks like it could be contagious and deadly. And they've been thrown out of their communities to die alone in the wilderness. Quarantined by society to protect the greater good, leaving them desperate and lonely and hopeless.

There is no cure for the disease they have. It will not simply heal up and go away. You think quarantining from COVID is bad. These men will never enter society again. No jobs. No families. Nothing. They, honestly, have nothing to be thankful for.

So when Jesus heals them, he doesn't just make their lives easier. He doesn't just relieve them of pain and suffering. He gives them their lives back. He gives them everything. Everything that we ourselves give thanks for every year. Jobs and families. Homes and friendships. And, yes, good health and the prospect of a long, happy life.

And Jesus does this all of this despite who they are. For there was nothing about them that was particularly deserving of mercy. Nothing in their background is pointed out to us. Nothing except, of course, the fact that they are Samaritans. The one thing that should have made Jesus less likely to help them.

And he certainly didn't heal them because of their character or gratitude. Nine out of the ten take this act of mercy completely for granted. They take the gift and move on with their new lives without even looking back. Only one turns to thank Jesus and give Him the thanks and praise He deserves.

Yet, Jesus' response to him tells us something important. First, he cracks a joke. Not a "ha ha" joke. A sarcastic, kind of insulting joke. *"Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"* You can almost see Jesus rolling His eyes and thinking to Himself, "How typical."

Yet, as critical as those words are, He doesn't use them as a launching point into chastising the other nine. Of taking back His gift or condemning them for their ingratitude. No, the gift is theirs. It's already been given.

Instead, He turns to the one who returned and tells him to leave. "Get up... go. Get out of here." But then he says those few, oh so important words. *"Your faith has made you well."*

Now, it's easy to read this and think that Jesus is talking about the faith to return and give praise to God for His healing. But that's not what the Bible says. The text says that the ten men were healed as they went along. Long before this guy ever thought to give Jesus his thanks. Which means the faith that healed him was not in the thanks he gave to God after the fact, but the faith to cry out in the first place with his ten friends, *"Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"*

Here's what it boils down to: these ten men were healed regardless of whether they thanked Jesus. All ten. The other nine ungrateful good-for-nothings? Yeah, them too. They all had faith that Jesus was the one and only person they could turn to for healing. He was their one and only cure for the incurable. And because of that faith, they were healed. Regardless of how they responded afterwards.

We are the ten men. Each one of us, every day of our lives, is one of those men. None of us deserve God's blessing. None of us deserve this life we were given. We approached the Son of God as foreigners, plagued by an incurable disease, with nothing to earn us His favor. But in His love, He has healed us. He has given us our lives back.

Each one of us, every day of our lives, is one of those men. Every once in a while, like right now in worship or maybe tomorrow around our Thanksgiving feast, we return to God and we give Him the thanks and praise He deserves. And He tells to rise and go and continue in the faith that made us well.

But if we're honest with ourselves, the truth is, nine times out of ten we are ungrateful good-for-nothings. We take our healing for granted and we move on with our lives without looking back.

And that's wrong. It's an act of ingratitude that deserves God's scorn. In fact, it deserves God's wrath. But once again, we don't get what we deserve. Jesus does not take back the gift He has given us. That life is ours now. God may roll His eyes at us and say to Himself, "How typical." But no matter our sin, no matter our lack of thanks, He does not take His blessing from us. And He never will.

No, the God who desires us to turn to him with supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings, does not turn away from us when we fail to thank and praise, serve and obey him. For he desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. He desires all people to see him as the savior that he really is.

He desires all people to turn to him in faith not just to heal their physical needs, but their spiritual needs. Faith to preserve not just their bodies, but their souls too. Faith to bring them not just through the disease of COVID, but through the disease of sin and death. Faith to see in him life and life abundant.

May this bounteous God through all our life be near us, with ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us and keep us in his grace and guide us when perplexed and free us from all ills in this world and the next. Amen.