

Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee.¹² As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance¹³ and called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”

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

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

¹⁷ Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?¹⁸ Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”¹⁹ Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.” (Luke 17:11-19)

Give Thanks to the Lord!

Have you ever been surprised by a thank you? The first time someone thanked me for my military service on a Veteran’s Day, it surprised me. After all, I’m not a combat veteran. While I didn’t like everything about the army, I chose to enlist. I got to spend two years in Germany. I got college money out of the deal. I don’t feel like I deserve the same kind of appreciation as someone who landed on the beaches in Normandy or who hacked his way through the jungle in Vietnam. So even though it happens every year, it still surprises me a little bit. Have you ever been surprised by a thank you? Maybe your child brought you flowers from the garden or did an art project at school that said thank you for all you do. Maybe a boss gave you a gift card because you’ve been putting in lots of extra hours on a big project. Those things can be surprising enough. But what if it came from someone who really didn’t like you? Your boss has done nothing but criticize you and out of the blue came this recognition of your hard work. That would be a big surprise, wouldn’t it? Our gospel lesson for today records a surprising thank you. Jesus himself comments on how out of the ordinary it was. If our Lord notices such a thing, what lesson do you think there is for us on the evening before our national day of Thanksgiving? My friends, **Give thanks to the Lord!**

Jesus, of course, was never truly surprised by anything. The Son of God knows all things. He knew exactly what was going to happen when he healed these ten men and who would come back to thank him. But God records this event because it was such an unusual thing. Even without being surprised, our Lord still has the capacity to gaze in wonder at the amazing things that he himself created – like the faith of a Samaritan leper.

When this incident took place, Jesus was making that slow, round-about trip from the northern-most extreme of Israel to Jerusalem. In Jesus’ day, the land we call Israel was divided into three parts. In the north was Galilee and in the south was Judea. Both of those were Jewish territories. But in between was Samaria. The Samaritans were mixed race. They were descended from a mixture of Jews and foreigners. At some point in the past, they had doctored their copies of the Old Testament to make their part of the country more important than Jerusalem. Needless to say, there was a lot of bad blood between Samaritans and Jews.

Jesus stopped in a village on the border between Samaria and Galilee. He was meant by ten men whom our Bibles call lepers. They may have suffered from true leprosy – a condition called Hansen’s disease in which the nerves in your hands and feet die and that leads to deterioration of the flesh. It’s a gruesome, nasty disease. But it’s also possible that these men suffered from some other, far less damaging skin condition. It’s impossible to know. But whatever they really had, the social effects were overwhelming. You see, under Old Testament law, if someone had this kind of skin disease, they were unclean. That meant that they could never go into the temple. They could never participate in the worship life of the Jewish people. Worse, they could not stay at home. They had to live “outside the camp” – away from society. They had to dress in rags and keep at a distance even from their own families. They had to warn everyone who approached them by shouting, “Unclean! Unclean!” because anyone who touched them or even their cloths would become unclean themselves. So whatever physical pain they suffered was compounded by the social isolation they felt.

That’s probably why the ten of them were together. They needed some company. In accord with that ancient law, they did not approach Jesus. They stood at a distance and cried out, “**Jesus, Master, have pity on us!**” They really didn’t need to say anymore. Jesus knew what their heart’s desire was. So he granted it. Now, he did not say, “Ok, I’ll heal you.” He told them, “**Go, show yourselves to the priests.**” Why did he say that?

Because the same law that condemned them to social isolation also said what to do if somehow they were cured. A priest had to examine them. If the priest determined that the disease was really gone, they could go home. So when Jesus told them to go show themselves to the priests, he was implying, “You’ll have a reason to do that.” In other words, he was promising to heal them.

But they weren’t healed yet. Luke tells us, “**And as they went, they were cleansed.**” So why did they go? They took Jesus at his word. It was an act of faith. That makes the whole question of who came back and thanked Jesus matter to you and me. As they went, they suddenly realized that they were cleansed. Maybe they felt different. If they had true Hansen’s disease, maybe they suddenly got feeling back in their hands and feet and fingers and toes. If they had some other disease, maybe they stopped itching. Or maybe they could see each other’s hands and faces and realized that the person next to them was healed so they looked at their own hands and asked each other if their own faces were healed. However it happened, all ten of them knew that Jesus had done a miracle that would give them their lives back.

So what did they do? Nine of them continued on their way. Why did they keep going? You could probably come up with several reasons. Jesus had told them to go. They could’ve argued they were just following his instructions. But probably the greatest reason was that they wanted the nightmare to be over. They wanted to get home as fast as possible and that road led through the priests, not through Jesus. They may even have been afraid that whatever was happening would wear off before they got to the priests and they would suffer a crushing disappointment.

But one man ran back, praising God all the way. He fell at Jesus’ feet and thanked him for what he had done. This man was a Samaritan – one of those mixed race, theologically suspect foreigners. Why did he return to Jesus? Obviously, to thank him. God had finally answered the prayers these men and their families must have offered over and over again. The only right response was to thank and praise God. That had to take precedence over every other consideration. That is the response of true and living faith. Jesus underlined the difference in their actions when he asked, “**Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?**” Those other nine men should have put thanking and praising God first on their list too! Now, Jesus does not say they were unbelievers and I hope that all nine of them will be with us in heaven. But what did Jesus say about this foreigner whose people didn’t always get their theology right? “**Rise and go; your faith has made you well.**” His faith had led him to stand at a distance and ask Jesus for mercy. That same faith had brought him back to say thank you to his Lord.

So what would we have done if we were among those lepers whom Jesus healed as they headed off to see the priests? Obviously, we’d all like to think that our first reaction would’ve been to run back to Jesus, too, right? But is saying thank you to God the first thought that comes into our heads when God does something wonderful for us? When you closed on your house, did you stop to thank the Lord? When your kids were born, when you first got married, when you landed a job that you really wanted, how long did it take to think of thanking God for that gift? Maybe you were like the Samaritan. But I fear that I am not always like that. I wonder how many of us here today have to admit that sometimes we need a national day of thanksgiving to remind us how blessed by God we are to have jobs and families and health and all those other gifts.

Jesus’ words can cut us to the heart, especially here in the Lutheran church. We’ve spent enormous amounts of time and effort making sure that we have pastors and teachers who know the truth and teach the truth in our church and school. We ask our children to spend two years in catechism class, even when they’ve spent the six years before that taking Christlight classes, just so that they have their doctrine straight. And I would never argue that we shouldn’t do that! But is it possible that we sometimes spend so much time and effort on getting our doctrinal truths straight that we forget to apply our faith to the reality of life? If we have a problem remembering to thank God for our blessings, that might be true.

Or it might even be true that we don’t see how much God has blessed us. Not one of us is an outcast like those ten lepers were. Even if we’re sick, we can still go home. We can still come to church. We can still ask our pastor to bring us communion if we can’t get out of the hospital or our own house. Even if we struggle to make ends meet, God provides us with food and clothing and shelter. And most of us have a whole lot more than that. Many of us here have skills and education that produce good jobs and a high standard of living. Where do those blessings come from? They all come from God. Do we remember to give thanks to him for all that he has given us?

I fear that sometimes we don't. In the end, that's just sin. It deserves God's punishment in hell. But God doesn't send us to hell. Jesus didn't even take back the healing from the nine lepers who didn't return. I hope that they eventually repented of their confused priorities and trusted in their Savior. But even if they didn't, let's make sure that we do. Our failure to thank God is forgiven in the blood of Christ. Jesus took away even that sin. He died and he rose so that today, God doesn't look at us even like the Samaritan who came back. God has a higher view of us. He sees us as Jesus. He sees us as perfect. He calls us holy and forgiven and loved. He even gave us the faith that trusts that all that is true and finds peace in his forgiveness.

That faith turns back to him and lifts up joyful hearts to praise and thank him. That faith makes the holiday we will celebrate tomorrow more than just a long weekend off of work, more than just a wonderful family time, more than a civic expression of gratitude to whatever generic "higher power" there is out there. We trust in Jesus and so we know that along with the forgiveness and life he has won for us, he has showered endless physical blessings on us. Faith thanks and praises him for that.

Faith takes all our problems to God. We can say that our faith heals us just like it did for that Samaritan leper because we hear God's call to bring all that we suffer to him and we trust that he hears and answers our prayers. Every time he eases our pain, every time he grants us what we asked for, every time he does something even better, he does that because we are his children and he loves us. What makes us his children? Our faith. That faith causes us to climb into our Father's lap and pour out all our hurts and sorrows there so he can heal them.

My friends, God loves our faith. God the Father gave it and he still marvels at it. Jesus loves our thankfulness. He is the cause of it and he wonders at what he has made. The Holy Spirit loves our songs of praise. He inspires them and he listens to them with rapt attention. Today and tomorrow, my friends, put that faith into practice. **Give thanks to the Lord. Amen.**