

Sermon for Sunday, October 9, 2022
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
“Shaped by Thanksgiving”
Pastor Marion Pruitt-Jefferson
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa

Sermon on Luke 17:1-11

Beloved people of God,

This beautiful and well known story is about healing, gratitude and inclusion. There is a lot to think about and marvel at. (*Jesus is not trying to teach us to live more polite lives by saying thank you more often – even though that is a perfectly wonderful thing to do.*) Where should we focus our attention? You might think that Jesus would want us to focus on the healing. After all, it’s a pretty big deal when just one person is cured of an incurable and deadly disease – but 10 people all at one time! That’s pretty spectacular. But the shape of this story, especially the way it concludes, makes me think that it is the action of giving thanks that Jesus wants us to notice and pay attention to. Something more is happening here than simply proper etiquette. In this outpouring of grace and in the act of thanksgiving, Jesus is revealing to us the pattern of our lives as God’s beloved ones.

A few weeks ago I sent a birthday card with a small gift to a family member. She’s a beautiful young woman who’s just finished her master’s degree and begun a new career. She’s also grieving the death of her mother and tending to the needs of her widowed father. She’s got a lot on her plate. So I understand why she never got around to saying thank you. I do. But even so, I admit that at first I felt a little angry about it. Couldn’t she have found 30 seconds to write a simple text, “Hey, got your card. Thanks!” After a bit, my anger faded and what I discovered beneath it was a feeling of sadness. I love this young woman, and I cherish our relationship. In the absence of a thank you what was missed was a precious opportunity for a deeper connection with her. And that made me sad.

I wonder if that was what Jesus experienced when only one of the nine people cured of leprosy returned to say thank you? Being fully divine and fully human, Jesus shared all of our human emotions – even the ones that make us vulnerable like sadness, loneliness, disconnection. We might be tempted to think that Jesus judged the nine who failed to show gratitude. But I think differently. I think Jesus was saddened by the absence of the other nine. I think Jesus was sad because of the missed opportunity to be in a deeper relationship with them. Because Jesus is the incarnation of God, and God is Love, and that is what love does. Love always seeks out the beloved so that a living, life-giving relationship can take place. All 10 of those people suffering from leprosy were God’s beloved. All of them were healed whether or not they chose to return and give thanks. The gift of healing was freely given because that’s what Jesus does, what God does in all our lives ... freely pours out blessing upon blessing. The one who turns back to give thanks doesn’t get any more healing than the others received. What he does experience is a deeper connection with Jesus. Having begged for mercy and received the unconditional gift of

grace in being healed, he returned to Jesus with praise and thanksgiving. In doing so, he receives the beautiful and transformative gift of a deeper connection to Jesus, and through Jesus to God.

Imagine with me for a moment what happened next. As the one who gave thanks went on his way and returned to live a full life in the community – a life that was denied to him because of his illness – I can picture him running down the street, stopping to tell anyone who would listen about all that Jesus had done for him. I can see him bursting with joy and gratitude. I can see him looking at all the people in his village with new eyes. I can see him wanting to share the compassion and mercy that he received with others who are in need. I can see that from his experience of the unconditional grace and mercy of God and through the act of giving thanks, he was drawn close to the heart of Jesus and Jesus was drawn closer in relationship to him. He was transformed through unconditional grace and set free to live a life of thanksgiving, a life overflowing in joy, love, generosity, compassion, and kindness. This is the pattern of life lived in relationship to God. It is the pattern of life that God intends for us. And it is the pattern we experience and live into as we come together here to draw near to the One who lovingly seeks to draw near to us.

Maybe that's why the pattern of our worship service is filled with thanksgiving from beginning to end. Words like Praise, Glory, and Alleluia, which are close cousins of Thanksgiving, are everywhere in our hymns and liturgy. When we engage in worship, we immerse ourselves in the practice of giving thanks to God. Week after week, we trace this beautiful pattern of thanksgiving on our hearts and minds. As we do so, we are drawn closer to Jesus, and we experience this unconditional grace which sets us free to live lives of thanksgiving out in the world.

Of course, when we walk through those doors on any given Sunday, giving thanks might not be what's uppermost in our minds. Many of us who come through those doors carry a load of burdens, our private pain and grief, our despair over the condition of the world in which we live. So, we begin just a few steps back from thanksgiving. We begin like the 10 people with leprosy did – by crying out to Jesus for mercy. We sing “Kyrie Eleison . . ., Christe Eleison . . .”, which literally means Lord, have mercy. Christ have mercy. And even as we offer those prayerful songs, we know that the mercy we seek is already ours, has always been ours.

All of worship moves us towards thanksgiving and today especially so. The scriptures recount stories of healing. After hearing these wonderful stories, we respond by exclaiming, “Thanks be to God.” Psalm 111 is a recital of God's saving acts towards Israel, and it is an invitation to give thanks to God with our whole hearts.

When we stand to sing the “Alleluia” before the Gospel reading, this too is an act of thanksgiving and praise to God. We've now come to the part of worship where we get to hear the words of Jesus. And because the words of Jesus are so precious, so full of life-giving power, we adorn with even more words of thanksgiving, “Praise to you” and “Glory to you.”

The prayers of the church are another place where we pause to lift up our cares and concerns to God. Today, each prayer begins with thanksgiving to God and is then followed by our petitions for God's grace and mercy to be present in specific ways among specific groups of people

Then we have an offering, which is both a spiritual and very practical exercise of thanksgiving as we give back to God what God has first given us.

And then comes the high point – the moment towards which everything we have been doing together has been moving. Have you ever noticed what we call this moment in our worship??? We call it THE GREAT THANKSGIVING! After all the other thanksgivings we've been singing and speaking and praying about, it is this GREAT THANKSGIVING that is the pinnacle, the high point of our gathering together

Like the one leper who returns to Jesus to give thanks, we lift up our hearts and voices to give thanks to God for all that we have already received from God's gracious hand, and all that we are about to receive. For it is here that we, like him, come to kneel at the feet of Jesus with grateful hearts. In bread and wine, Jesus draws near to us in a most intimate way - entering into our very bodies and souls connecting us to him, to God, to the Holy Spirit, to one another, to all the saints gathered on earth and in heaven. It is here, in the very center of giving thanks, that our lives are joined to the endless life of Jesus, the abundant mercy of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

And then, having experienced and lived into this beautiful pattern of blessing and thanksgiving, and with that pattern etched upon our hearts, we are sent on our way back to the communities where we live our day-to-day lives. And like the one who returned to Jesus, we carry the love, and gratitude, and compassion, and joy that has filled us here to all we meet. Which is why, before we take our leave, there is one more offering of praise on our lips. Cindy will say, "Go in peace. Jesus is with you." And we will lift our voices together and proclaim: THANKS BE TO GOD.