

“Our Need for Thanksgiving”

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

Every so often, I receive a card or letter thanking me for a particular act of ministry. It might be from a couple whose wedding I performed, or the family of a loved one who had died, or someone who had been in hospital who I had visited. Whatever the occasion, I always appreciate these letters and the sentiments they convey; it is encouraging for me to know that my ministry has been a blessing to others.

But just because I appreciate receiving thank you cards doesn't mean I've always enjoyed writing them!

I've been writing thank you cards since I was a child. Whenever I received a gift, my parents would sit me down at the dining room table in front of a stack of thank you cards and watch over me as I wrote to thank someone for a gift they had given me – even if I wasn't all that crazy about the gift. It was easy writing a thank you note for a present I really enjoyed, like the latest toy; but when it was for a present like a pair of socks, writing a thank you note was a real effort. But no matter the gift or the occasion, my parents insisted that I send my thanks to those who had given me the present. It wasn't merely to show my appreciation for the gift, they would tell me; it was to teach me the importance of giving thanks.

Whether or not you are in the habit of sending thank you notes (either the old-fashioned written kind or more modern electronic versions), giving thanks at the heart of our gatherings on this Thanksgiving weekend. Families across the country will gather at their feast tables, often pausing to consider all of the blessings for which they are thankful. In our congregations and in churches of all faith traditions, we gather to give thanks to God for the blessings of the harvest and *“all good gifts around us [that] are sent from heaven above.”* As we offer our thanks and praise to God on this day of national thanksgiving, we are reminded that it is not only on this day that we give thanks, but 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.”*

There are many reasons why we give thanks as Canadians and as Christians. Giving thanks is a way in which we express our gratitude to those who have given of themselves to bless us. Giving thanks remind us of the many blessings we have received, and that we should never take these blessings for granted. Giving thanks often motivates us to be a blessing to others, especially those whose lives are filled with hardship and deprivation. Martin Luther reminds us that in giving thanks we are reminded that even though the harvests that we gather in are the result of months of hard work, we remain dependent on the Lord of the harvest for the blessings that we have received:

- “A believing heart well perceives how our plowing and sowing would be lost unless God's goodness were here at work. Even though we must do our work diligently and seek our food from the soil, we must in no way trust in our work as though our hands made the harvest. More is needed than our human hands. God's blessing and his mighty keeping are essential to growth.” – Exposition of Psalm 147, *Day by Day We Magnify You*.

Thanksgiving serves both as an expression of our gratitude and reminder of the many ways in which we are indebted to God and to others. But are there any benefits to us when we give thanks? Can thanksgiving be a source of strength to us, a means through which we open ourselves to new possibilities and fresh resources of inspiration and revitalization?

Today's Gospel lesson invites us to consider how thanksgiving can be a blessing to those who are giving thanks. It is the story of Jesus' encounter with ten lepers, when "*on the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.*" (Luke 17:11). In this border region, Jesus meets a group of people who are living on the other side of an invisible but very real barrier of separation; persons who were labeled "lepers" were mandated by law to keep their distance from others, live in colonies outside of their home communities, and position themselves on the edges of main thoroughfares to make their appeals for charity:

- "The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; 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.

The "*ten men who had leprosy*" (a better translation than "ten lepers" and a more humanizing and dignifying recognition of their personhood) suffered from various skins conditions that are not limited to Hansen's Disease, the modern understanding of leprosy; these diseases including conditions that produced scales, inflammation, and lesions. Jesus had previously encountered a person with leprosy in Luke 5:12:13:

- "Once, when he was in one of the cities, there was a man covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he bowed his face to the ground and begged him, 'Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.' Then Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, 'I do choose. Be made clean. Immediately the leprosy left him.'

In today's text, the ten lepers approach Jesus from the distance and cry out to him, "*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!*" (17:13), again recognizing Jesus as the one who is Lord and Master of the universe. Luke reports that "*he saw them,*" which in this context means more than physical sight but perceiving the opportunity to be merciful toward another person in the manner that the Good Samaritan's seeing the man at the side of the road moved him to respond (10:33). Instead of touching the lepers had he had in his previous encounter with another person afflicted with this disease, Jesus merely instructs them to "*go, show yourselves to the priests*" (17:14) in accordance with the Torah's instruction of how one could be declared cured of this condition (Leviticus 14:2-32). As they travel in obedience to Jesus' command, "*they were made clean.*" The healing of these persons afflicted with leprosy functions as a sign of the power of God's kingdom, recalling the healing of Naaman the Syrian in 2 Kings 5:1-14 ("*... his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.*") and a sign of the coming Kingdom in which "*death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain shall be no more, for the first things have passed away.*" (Revelation 21:4).

The story takes an unexpected turn, however, when one of the ten persons who Jesus had cleansed of leprosy "*turned back, praising God with a loud voice.*" (17:15). In both his identity and in his response to healing, this man resembles two other Biblical persons. His act of praise resembles that of Naaman, who declared that "*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). Like the man who

was filled with compassion when he saw a wounded man in need on the side of the road to Jericho, the man who returns to give thanks is a Samaritan, a member of a nation regarded by Jews as unclean (*"Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans."* – John 4:9), descendants of mixed marriages that followed from the Assyrian settlement of people from various regions in the fallen northern kingdom:

- "The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria, in place of the people of Israel; they took possession of Samaria, and settled in its cities." – 2 Kings 17:24.

The common disdain for Samaritans stands in sharp contrast to the Samaritan's response to God in this healing narrative: *"He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him."* (17:16), showing that *"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."* (Alan Culpepper). Even though the other nine had been faithful to Jesus' instruction to show themselves to the priests, this Samaritan's thankful response prompts Jesus to both respond to his act of thanksgiving and to bestow upon him a particular blessing:

- "Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'" – 17:17-19.

The blessing that Jesus bestows on this Samaritan can also be translated *"your faith has saved you,"* the same blessing he bestows on the woman who *"began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair... 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'" (7:38, 50).* While the other nine did nothing wrong and received the gift of healing, this thankful person receives a second blessing in Jesus' declaration of salvation. *"They got what they wanted, but this one received more than he had dreamed of asking for."* (Culpepper).

The God we praise on this day of Thanksgiving showers his blessings upon all of creation no matter if they are faithful or faithless, good or evil; as Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, *"he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."* (Matthew 5:45). In the *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther observes that God gives us all of the necessities for daily living *"out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!"* The blessings we receive are not the result of our thanksgiving; but in giving thanks, we open ourselves to new blessings and new possibilities that we cannot even imagine. All ten lepers received the gift of physical healing, but one day their physical lives would come to an end. But only the tenth leper, the one who returned to give thanks, received the gift of eternal life from the one who *"has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death."* (Luther). While it is indeed right and salutary for us to offer thanks and praise to God for all the blessings God has bestowed on us, in the act of giving thanks we open ourselves to additional blessings and fresh possibilities that are available to us only when we lift our hands in thanks and praise to receive the gifts that God will continue to shower upon God's thankful people.

- "Gratitude draws us out of ourselves into something larger, bigger, and grander than we could imagine and joins us to the font of blessing itself... it frees us from fear, releases us from anxiety, and emboldens us to do more and dare more than we'd ever imagined. Even to return to a Jewish rabbi to pay homage when you are a Samaritan because

you've realized that you are more than a Samaritan, or a leper, or even a healed leper; you are a child of God, whole and accepted and beautiful just as you are." – David Lose.

As my parents made certain that I got into the habit of giving thanks in writing all of those thank you notes, our Lord calls us to become a thankful people not only on our day of Thanksgiving, but every day. In giving thanks, we acknowledge that *"all good gifts around us are sent from heaven above,"* and open ourselves up to even more blessings that God bestows on us out of God's infinite love. As we heed the apostle's call to *"give thanks in all circumstances"* (1 Thessalonians 5:18), we become the ones who will receive *"abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine"* (Ephesians 3:20). In giving thanks for all of the blessings we have received, we will become a people who will be infinitely blessed to be an infinite blessing to others, so that all may lift their voices in praise and thanksgiving *"in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."*