

“We Need a Little Thanksgiving”

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

“We need a little Thanksgiving, right this very minute.”

No, that’s not how the song goes; it’s *“we need a little Christmas, right this very minute.”* But what many people don’t realize is that the origins of this cheerful Christmas classic aren’t as bright and merry as we might imagine. The song is from the Broadway musical *Mame*, and is performed after Mame has lost her fortune in the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and decides that she, her young nephew Patrick, and her two household servants “need a little Christmas now” to cheer them up. Even though it’s week away from Christmas Day, Mame feels that her household needs the joy of Christmas to bring light into the darkness of her present circumstances:

- “For I’ve grown a little leaner, grown a little colder; grown a little sadder, grown a little older. And I need a little angel sitting on my shoulder, I need a little Christmas now.”

As we gather today after enduring a week of unspeakable dark and tragic news, we may wish for some light and joy to brighten our lives and those of the world in which we live. From the overwhelmingly horrific news of the massacre of innocent concert goers in Las Vegas, to the shocking death of our brother Chad, to the images of suffering in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, to the unimaginable threat of nuclear war – we need a message that can lift us up, a word that can transform darkness into light, a voice that proclaims good news in a world in which bad news seems to be gaining the upper hand.

In other words, we need a word of thanksgiving – right this very minute; because *“of all of our responses to events blessed or challenging, great or small, one of the most powerful – and oft overlooked – is that of thanksgiving.”* (David Lose). It’s the message that is in today’s Gospel lesson, in which Jesus meets a group of lepers as he was *“on the way to Jerusalem ... going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.”* (Luke 17:11). They approached Jesus as he entered a village; *“keeping their distance, they called out, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’”* (17:12-13). Their behavior was in obedience to the Torah, in which any person with a leprous disease was required to live “outside the camp” and cry out “unclean, unclean” whenever anyone approached:

- “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 the 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 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.

If a leper were fortunate enough to recover, a priest had to certify that the person was clean before he or she could return to the community (Leviticus 14:2-32).

The ten lepers “raised a voice,” calling out to Jesus in unison and addressing him as “Master,” a title that appears frequently in Luke but with this one exception always on the lips of Jesus’ disciples (*“Simon answered, ‘Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.’”* –

5:5). The call of mercy would ordinarily be a request for alms, but their recognition of Jesus as “Master” may be an indication that they share the disciples’ faith in Jesus, perhaps because they have heard of his healings and are pleading for a miracle for themselves (*“But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases.”* – 5:15).

Luke reports that *“when he saw them, he said, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’”* (17:14). Jesus’ looking upon them indicates more than mere physical sight; it perceives an opportunity to be merciful toward them, as the Good Samaritan showed mercy when he saw the man in need on the side of the road (*“But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.”* – 10:33). His instruction to show themselves to the priests in obedience to the commands of the Torah implies that they will be healed; and indeed, as they travel they are made well: *“And as they went, they were made clean.”* The healing occurs *“in the act of obedience rather than prior to their obedience ... Jesus treats the lepers as already healed, and in their act of obedient faith their healing takes place.”* (Fred Craddock).

It is through their obedience to the words of Jesus that all of the lepers receive the blessing that Jesus had promised them. But one leper goes beyond obedience: *“when he saw that he was healed, [he] turned back, praising God with a loud voice.”* (17:15). This man recognizes that God’s mercy has touched his life, that God has acted through Jesus, and he offers praise to God. As he shouts his words of praise, *“he prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him.”* (17:16), glorifying God in a manner that is a common response to the 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.
- *“Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, ‘We have seen strange things today.’”* – 5:26.
- *“When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.”* – 13:13.

Alone among all who had received healing that day, the Samaritan realized that the proper response to God’s mercy *“is not the presumption that it is something we deserve, but untainted gratitude and praise of God for God’s saving mercy.”* (Alan Culpepper).

Jesus’ response to the Samaritan’s praise is twofold. He first asks a series of questions: *“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?”* (17:18). Again, it must be noted that the other nine did nothing wrong; they followed Jesus’ instructions to the letter and received the blessing promised them. But in giving thanks, the tenth man received something else: the declaration from Jesus to *“get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”* (17:19). This does not imply that he received a second healing; a better translation might be *“your faith has saved you,”* for Jesus is declaring that his faith has made him not only physically well but also bestowed on him wholeness and salvation. The other nine were healed, but only this tenth man received Jesus’ declaration of salvation. *“They got what they wanted, but this one received more than he had dreamed of asking for.”* (Culpepper).

Therein lies the reason why *“we need a little thanksgiving, right this very minute,”* for in giving thanks we open ourselves to blessings that are far greater than we could possibly imagine. Thanksgiving focuses our attention on God’s steadfast presence in our lives in all circumstances, that *“though the wrong seems oft so strong God is the ruler yet.”* Thanksgiving opens our eyes to see that God is with us at all times, that nothing *“can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Romans 8:39). Thanksgiving brings us into the realm of God’s Kingdom, in which *“neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever.”* We are called as God’s holy people to *“give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”* (1

Thessalonians 5:18). Paul's teaching – which on the surface may appear to be impossible – presupposes two basic truths that are at the heart of the Christian faith:

1. Worship of God is the context of all of life: *"Everyday life must itself become our prayer."* (Karl Rahner). No matter what circumstances we may be facing – good or bad – a life of worship, *"of seeking to please and honor God and doing God's will means perpetual thanksgiving."* (Abraham Smith).
2. The truth of Christ's death and resurrection are the basis for a life of perpetual thanks. From the depths of life, we have the sure and certain knowledge that we have been *"given the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (1 Corinthians 15:58). The Cross of Christ is the basis for Paul's ability to give thanks even at the moment of his greatest despair: *"Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord."* (Romans 7:24-25).

As we gather with friends and loved ones at our Thanksgiving tables this weekend, we are also called and invited to gather at the Thanksgiving table of the Lord. The meal that we share in worship goes by many names: Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, the Sacrament of the Altar; but one name used in many churches is *Eucharist*, which means "thanksgiving." We gather at this table at the invitation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who we Lutheran Christians believe is truly present in this meal: *"It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself for us Christians to eat and to drink."* (*Small Catechism*). While Communion liturgies differ among churches, one element that is essential whenever and wherever we gather at the Lord's Table is hearing the Words of Institution that remind us of what took place on the night Jesus gave us this Holy Supper:

- "In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread, *and gave thanks*; broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: Take and eat; this is my body, given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me. Again, after supper, he took the cup, *gave thanks*, and gave it for all to drink, saying: This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sins. Do this for the remembrance of me." (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

The Lord's Supper is a *eucharist*, a thanksgiving meal, because we remember that giving thanks were at the heart of Jesus' institution of this holy sacrament. It is a thanksgiving meal because it is a meal in which we are invited as children of God to gather together for a *Holy Communion*, in which we are united both as sisters and brothers in Christ and in the presence of our Holy Lord and Saviour. It is a thanksgiving meal because as our Lord gave thanks on the night when he gave his life for the sake of all God's people, we are called to give thanks whenever we gather at this table for the assurance that God's presence and God's blessings abide with us always:

- "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." – ELW Holy Communion.

Even though I have said or sung these words many times over the years in my role as the presiding minister at the Lord's Supper, there have been times when it's been hard for me to see how "we should at *all* times and in *all* places" give thanks and praise to God. One Thanksgiving when I didn't feel at all thankful was eighteen years ago. My father died suddenly on November 12, 1999, less than two weeks from American Thanksgiving. While there were any reasons for us to give thanks for his life and the many ways we touched the lives of others (I'll never forget the hundreds of people who lined up at the funeral home to pay their respects), when we gathered at my Aunt Alice's for Thanksgiving dinner all I could focus on was the empty place where he would have sat and the reality that we would no longer share Thanksgiving dinner – or any other dinner – ever again. Of all of the emotions I was feeling as I choked down dinner that day, thanksgiving definitely *wasn't* one of them.

It was several weeks later – after the shock of his death, getting through Thanksgiving and Christmas, and resuming my pastoral duties in Niagara Falls – that I had an opportunity to sit down with the worship bulletin from his funeral service and look through the liturgy that I had planned with my friend Gunnar, who had been my parent’s pastor for many years. For some reason, my eyes were drawn to the first lesson from the book of Lamentations, a small Old Testament book that often gets overlooked because of its placement between the large books of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. It is a book of communal laments, funeral dirges that the people of Israel sang in times of shared mourning; but in the middle of their cries of pain and grief are words that shine like a bright light in the midst of deep darkness, words that spoke to me in a new and powerful way that has stayed with me all these years later:

- “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. ‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’ The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.” – Lamentations 3:21-26.

This is the reason why we can give thanks “at all times and in all places,” because we have that blessed assurance that God’s steadfast love is with us always, that no matter how dark or discouraging our current circumstances may be we have confidence that nothing – not even death – can separate us from God’s love which is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord. Our giving thanks brings us into God’s presence and reminds us that no matter what may happen today or in the future, *“the LORD of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our stronghold.”* (Psalm 46:7).

In this month when we commemorate the 500th Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation, we remember and give thanks for the life and teachings of Martin Luther, which remain at the heart of our church’s preaching and teaching. But we also remember the struggles that Luther endured throughout his life, which included a lifelong battle with depression and despair. Luther wrote openly about these dark moments, and how he was able to survive the darkness which may have destroyed him: when confronted with doubt and despair, Luther would write over and over again *baptizatus sum: I am baptized; for “the only way to drive out the Devil is through faith in Christ.”* Even in his darkest moments, Luther knew that he had a reason to give thanks because in the baptismal promise that *“neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever.”*

We need a little Thanksgiving – right this very minute.

Some of us will gather at Thanksgiving tables in which the absence of loved ones who have died in the past year will be a difficult reminder of their passing. Some of us will pass the turkey and gravy in the midst of worrying about their future or the future of their children. Some of us will not be gathering together because of the deep divisions that are separating us from family or friends. Some of us might try to block out the bad news that engulfs our world, even for a few hours. But no matter what circumstances we might be in on this Thanksgiving, we need Thanksgiving here and now – because at all times, in all places, no matter what fates or challenges may befall us, we have that blessed assurance that God is with us always, that a mighty fortress is our God, and that *“God his children ne’er forsaketh.”*

Thanks be to God!

Amen.