

Luke 17:11–19 (Trinity XIV)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
September 18, 2022

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Last Sunday we heard about the merciful Samaritan. This Sunday we hear about the thankful Samaritan. Once again Jesus is using as an example a person the Pharisees and teachers of the Law would despise, an unclean Samaritan. The example this Samaritan gives is the example of thanksgiving. It's no wonder, then, that this text from Luke 17 appointed today, for the 14th Sunday after Trinity, is the same Gospel text appointed for Thanksgiving Day in the United States. Jesus's cleansing of the ten lepers is a model for us of the true thanksgiving that follows after receiving such bountiful blessings from God. This morning we learn that true thanksgiving is directed towards the one who gives us all good things, to the one who gives us forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation, our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the true Temple where we bring our sacrifices of thanksgiving in response to the good things God has given us.

In ancient Israel, the debilitating, bacterial skin disease of leprosy meant expulsion from the community. A person who contracted leprosy was forced away from home and family, and even more profoundly from being able to worship God in the tabernacle and Temple. After a time of examination, the leper would be pronounced unclean by a priest. The leper would then wear torn clothes, let the hair of his head hang loose, and covering his mouth would cry out "unclean, unclean." Until the disease went away, the leper would live alone, dwelling outside the camp" (Lev 13:45–46). Of course, misery does love company. Lepers living alone outside the city would come together and form little communities, as we see in our Gospel text this morning with the ten lepers, the one being a Samaritan.

Leprosy, like so many unclean conditions in the Old Testament, is a picture of sin. Just like leprosy, sin is a disease that runs deep, yet we still are able to see its outward manifestations. All people born in the natural way have inherited original sin from Adam and Eve, passed down through the generations. And this original sin that infects the very heart and core of who we are then overflows into all the sinful tendencies and sinful actions we experience in ourselves daily. Our actual sins are the signs and symptoms of the much deeper root cause that is original sin.

And just like leprosy, sin tears apart family and friends. It destroys our lives and places us on the outside of the camp. Just as lepers were ceremonially unclean and unable to enter God's presence in the tabernacle and Temple, so does sin make us unclean, separating us from God's holy presence. Sin infects us like a disease, and so we cry out with the lepers, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Every Sunday we confess our sins and we cry out in the Kyrie, "Lord, have mercy upon us. Christ, have mercy upon us. Lord, have mercy upon us." We confess our sins and we pray for God's mercy upon us. And then in the Gloria we give thanks to God for His great glory and we pray to the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world to have mercy upon us and receive our prayer.

Jesus says to the lepers: "Go and show yourselves to the priests." When a leper was healed, the priest would go out of the camp and verify the healing. If the leprosy was gone, sacrifices were offered to the Lord to make the cleansing official (Lev 14). Jesus sent the lepers to the priests, and as they went on their way they were healed. The lepers trusted the Lord's word and went on their way despite all evidence to the contrary. They weren't healed and *then* went to the priests for cleansing. They went to the priests for cleansing trusting that the Lord *would* heal them. They trusted the Lord's Word and so they were healed.

All ten lepers were healed on their way to the Temple, but only one, the Samaritan, returned to the Lord in thanksgiving. The other lepers might well have been grateful for their new life they had been given. They could now rejoin their families and friends. They could again worship the Lord in His Temple. But the Samaritan actually thanks the one from whom all good things come. The Samaritan is not only grateful for being healed; he also thanks the one who gave him such a marvelous gift of new life, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thankfulness is a characteristic of Christians. We saw this on our Wittenberg retreat when we considered St. Paul's instructions to the Thessalonians to "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess 5:18). Non-Christians can be grateful for the blessings they receive. Anyone can be thankful in general for the good fortune that befalls them. But only Christians can truly be thankful because only Christians understand that all good things come not by chance, but through our Lord Jesus Christ. James 1[:17-18] says: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of His own will He brought us forth by the Word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures."

In grace, God the Father created man out of nothing. In grace He knit you together in your mother's womb (Ps 139:13). In grace God the Son redeemed you by shedding His blood for you on the cross. In grace, God the Holy Spirit sanctifies you, leading you into the Church where you hear the Gospel of salvation and receive the forgiveness and cleansing of sins that are yours in Christ Jesus. In every aspect of our physical and spiritual lives, there is so much a Christian can thank God for because it is God who has done everything for us. We are not just thankful in general. We thank the one from whom all good things come.

This Christian thankfulness is what the Old Testament calls a “sacrifice of thanksgiving.” When we cry out to the LORD for mercy and He listens to our pleas, when the LORD puts our sin away from us and remembers it no more, when the LORD cleanses us from the impurity of our sin, then we cannot help but respond in thanksgiving for everything the LORD has done for us. We can pray the words of Psalm 116: “I love the LORD, because He has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy. Because He inclined His ear to me, therefore I will call on Him as long as I live. . . I will offer to You the sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the LORD. I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all His people, in the courts of the house of the LORD, in your midst, O Jerusalem.” As Christians, we realize the physical and spiritual life God gives to us and preserves for us. That recognition of life in Christ can only be met with a spirit of thanksgiving to the one who gives us all good things.

Only the foreigner, the Samaritan, returned to Jesus to give thanks and glorify Him for this miraculous healing. The others kept going on their way to show themselves to the priests, but the Samaritan returns to the true High Priest (Heb 9:11). The others kept going on their way to the Temple, but the Samaritan recognizes who the true Temple actually is. The Samaritan understands that the true Temple is not the building in Jerusalem. The true Temple is the body of Jesus Christ. As our LORD says in John 2[:19–21], “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” He was speaking about the temple of His body. As God dwelt with His people in the tabernacle and Temple, so does God dwell with His people in the body of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the true Temple where we go for the cleansing of our sins, the true Temple where we offer our sacrifice of thanksgiving for everything the Lord has done for us. The Samaritan realizes he doesn’t need to travel to the temple and the priests. The true High Priest, the true Temple of God, was standing right in front of him the entire time.

Jesus is the true High Priest and Jesus is the true Temple of God, who even today comes to us in the midst of our sin and uncleanness. In Holy Baptism, the LORD saved us by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5). Christ gave Himself up for His bride, the Church, that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that He might present the Church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Eph 5:25–27). We cry out to the Lord for mercy and with a word of Absolution He forgives all our sins. We confess our uncleanness and the Lord takes our uncleanness upon Himself, giving us in exchange his pure robes of righteousness. We are polluted by sin, but Christ comes to us with His perfect flesh given into death for our sins and with his pure blood, spilled for us on the cross. In the Lord's Supper, in the holy body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, we receive the forgiveness of all our sins, and where there is forgiveness of sins there is also life and salvation. How appropriate, then, that this heavenly meal is also known as the Holy Eucharist, the feast of thanksgiving.

Like the lepers who were cleansed, we too, are given a new life, a fresh start. Our sins are forgiven, we are cleansed of our iniquities and impurities, and so we thank the Lord and sing his praise, telling everyone what He has done for us. We give thanks to the LORD God almighty that He has refreshed us through His salutary gifts, and we implore Him that of His mercy He would strengthen us in faith towards Him and in fervent love towards one another through Jesus Christ our Lord. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.