

A Heart of Thanksgiving

Luke 17:11-19

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

November 22, 2017 – Eve of Thanksgiving



Grace to you, and peace, from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. The Gospel we just read concludes with this well-known statement from Jesus to the leper just-cleansed: “Your *faith* has made you well.” Now there’s a right and a wrong way to understand these words. The wrong way would be to think that the man was cured by something inside himself, that the power for his healing had come from within, or that his own spirituality is what caused him to be saved. Such thinking is faulty because it totally misrepresents what faith actually is. It puts the focus on the believer rather than the One believed in. It locates the ability to save in man rather than in God. And it gives the credit and glory to the one who has faith rather than the One to whom faith must cling.

Faith, after all, is nothing in and of itself. Its power comes only from that in which it trusts. It’s defined not by its own qualities, but by the qualities of what it trusts in – and in Christianity, that’s Christ. Faith by itself is like a glass without water. If you’re thirsty, I could give you the most expensive, ornate crystal glass goblet in the world, but if there’s nothing in it, your thirst won’t be quenched. So, it’s not the glass, but what’s in the glass that counts. That’s how it is with faith. It’s not faith itself but what faith clings to. It’s the content of faith. What it contains and embraces – that’s the most important thing. In other words, it’s not your trust, but rather where your trust has been placed.

That’s why statements such as, “You have to have faith,” or “My faith saw me through it” ultimately are meaningless – at least by themselves. The question also needs to be asked: “What’s that faith in – yourself, your doctor, your banker, the government, the forces of nature, your horoscope, or God – and which God? You see, when it comes right down to it, everyone has some kind of faith – even atheists. But not everyone has Christian faith. Some people believe in science and technology. Others believe in a “god” of their own making – a “god” who’s been molded to fit into their own understanding of life. Still others trust in power, prestige, or possessions. But Christian faith is directed only toward Christ – who together with the Father and the Holy Spirit is the only true God.

That’s what Luther was talking about in the Catechism when he wrote that we are to fear, love, and trust in God above all things – and then went on to describe who God is.

If you understand all that, the words Jesus spoke to the leper in this text are going to be so much clearer. When Jesus said, “Your faith has made you well,” He wasn’t saying that the leper had worked up this thing called “faith” within himself – or that he had been the cause of God’s blessing. Rather, He was saying that God’s Word and Spirit had brought this leper to faith in Him as Christ – the One who alone had the power to deliver him from the deteriorating power of sin. It’s as if Jesus was saying, “Your faith is the correct kind of faith. You believed I could help you, and rightly so – for I alone have the power to do it. It’s according to My Father’s grace that you trusted in Me. And *that* faith has made you whole.”

The point of all this is that faith isn’t some latent inner quality, or a general belief in the existence of God. True faith actively and specifically desires Christ alone – trusts in Him and in all He’s done – and constantly seeks Him where He has promised to be – in His Word, preaching, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. Such faith calls on the Lord in time of need – and looks to Him for every good gift. Look again at the ten lepers in this account. Luke tells us how they stood afar off because they knew their uncleanness. Yet, they were still bold to cry out for Jesus’ aid, saying: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” These ten lepers firmly trusted in Christ. Their confidence was that He would heal them – and in this belief they neither faltered nor hesitated.

And that’s the chief lesson here for you. You should commit yourself to God and trust Him for everything. You shouldn’t doubt or waver but believe that for Christ’s sake God will give and do for you whatever you ask. And even if He doesn’t do it in the way and at the time you prefer, you’ll still believe. A wavering heart that doesn’t believe – and isn’t convinced that it will receive that for which it asks – will certainly receive nothing. That’s why the example of these ten lepers is so important – for what it shows us is that God’s goodness can be trusted implicitly. God will never let our hearts falter, but instead patiently

expect to receive what we pray for – whether those prayers be for health when we’re sick, for food when we’re poor, for righteousness when we’re unrighteous and full of sin, or for life in place of death. We know God will ultimately give us what we need – even though it might not be according to our timetable – or in the way we wanted to receive it.

Sometimes God makes us wait – even as we saw with the ten lepers. Jesus didn’t heal these men right away. He simply said to them, “Go, show yourselves to the priests,” so that *they* might declare them clean. And note how Jesus sent them off to do this without any apparent outward change in their condition. It was then – St. Luke tells us – it was then that they were cleansed. They had faith in the promise implicit in Jesus’ directions – even though they had no evidence of that promise having been fulfilled. They believed they’d been made well, even though they couldn’t see it. And that’s exactly how it is with you. You cry out to Jesus in your need, and He calls back to you with His words of life. Of your sin He says, “You are forgiven.” Of your physical infirmities He says, “You are healed.” And, of your struggles and difficulties He says, “I have delivered you from them all.”

Yet, by all appearances, it often seems that nothing much has changed – as you still find yourself facing many of the same problems and difficulties you had before. Nevertheless – just as He did with the lepers – Jesus sends you on your way, saying: “Go to the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from God – the eternally blessed Dwelling Place of God’s people – and worship Me there in My Church.” Hearing Christ’s Word and Promise you trust, even though you have no visible evidence. You walk by faith, not by sight, believing you’ve been forgiven, healed, and delivered by Christ – even though you haven’t always been blessed to see it outwardly.

And all this you do because you know Christ’s words are able to deliver what they promise – because they flow to you from His cross – the very same cross that was waiting at the end of that road Jesus asked those lepers to travel. The lepers went down that road to gain for themselves a new lease on life, but Jesus would soon travel that road to give up His life – both for us and for them. Indeed, His very purpose for coming into this fallen world was that He might pay the ultimate price to release us from sin, suffering, death and the devil. Breathing in our sin-poisoned air, He Himself was afflicted with our af-

flictions in order to save and rescue us – even as it’s written, “Surely He took up our sorrows and carried our diseases.”

When Jesus comforted someone, He did it by taking their sadness upon Himself. When He healed someone, He did it by taking on their sickness. When He forgave someone, He did it by taking on their sin. And that, dear friends, that’s what Jesus has done for you. All the weight of this fallen world was laid on Jesus’ shoulders and carried to the cross where it perished alone with Him. Our Lord wants you to know that your sin, sorrow and sickness have been overcome – that they’ve been left dead and buried in the tomb from which Christ arose in triumph – so that trusting in Him, you might now have everything you need. Through Him you have healing in the midst of sickness, holiness in the midst of weakness, victory in the midst of things which overwhelm – even life in the midst of death. By faith you have it all in Christ, a truth that will be revealed to everyone at the close of the age. That’s why St. Paul could confidently say, “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Yet in this glorious account of the ten lepers there’s still a touch of sadness to be noted – and that because of the fact that out of the ten, only one man returned to give thanks – only one! What this teaches is that you must ever be on your guard lest you fall away from the faith when times are good. You have to be on guard against the temptation of forgetting what God has accomplished for you – or of thinking you no longer need God because presently everything’s going so well. You need to be always like the Samaritan leper – that one who glorified God for the cleansing He’d received. You need to be full of true and steady faith, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, acknowledging that all things – including your faith – are a gift from Him – and this includes the words our Lord Christ spoke to that leper who was cleansed. Hear those words afresh right now so that you might depart from this place with a heart full of thanksgiving: “Your faith has made you well. The Lord in whom you trust has saved you.” Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.