

25 November 2009  
Eve of National Thanksgiving

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Lives of Thanks and Praise”

Text: Luke 17:11-19; Philippians 4:6-20; Deuteronomy 8:1-10

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

Jews and Samaritans did *not* hang out together. The Jews thought the Samaritans were unclean half-breed dogs, and the Samaritans thought the Jews were stuck-up self-righteous, judgmental hypocrites. So they stayed apart . . . *except* if you were a leper. That changed everything. When you had leprosy, all that mattered was that you had leprosy, and fellow lepers became your new family, your friends, your community. It didn't matter what color they were, or what nationality, whether they were rich or poor, educated or uneducated - lepers had a bond that transcended even the most deep-rooted hostilities. They lived on the border, having no place to call home. For they were lepers. Dead men walking. And that's all that mattered.

But when Jesus comes along one day, a ray of hope shines into the lepers' dark world. And so they cry out to Him, **“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.”** Words that are music to Jesus' ears! As sweet a song ringing in His ears as the song of any angel choir. For to have mercy is why He has come, and to those who ask He does not refuse. And so He heals them - not with some big show or mighty word, but simply, quietly. And suddenly, they are lepers no more. They have been given a new life.

That is the new reality that the Samaritan seemed to realize. It wasn't that he was thankful and the others weren't. I'm sure the other nine were thankful too - who wouldn't be? And yet there *is* something different. This foreigner is suddenly a foreigner no more - not because he can go back to his people, but because he has been made part of a new people: the people of God, a child of God. Before, he could not go to God, he could not go to the Temple; he would not be allowed in. But in Jesus, the Temple had come to him! And while the other nine lepers go show themselves to the priests, this one leper shows himself and his faith to the Great High Priest who has healed him, made him clean, and was standing before him. What else could he do but fall at his feet in thanks and praise.

That is why on this Eve of our Thanksgiving holiday, we too gather at the feet of our Great High Priest, to thank Him not only for all He has provided for us this year, for all He has provided for our body and life - but to thank and praise Him especially

for this greatest blessing of all: that we are foreigners no more, but have been made part of a new people. That through His cleansing forgiveness, we are children of God.

It's not that others aren't thankful - I'm sure they are. But there is something different when our Lord not only provides all that we need for this body and life, but when He comes Himself in mercy. When He answers our "Lord, have mercy" with His Word of Absolution and with the life-giving food of His Body and Blood. And we know that unworthy as we are, fallen as we are, unclean as we are, that instead of being exiled forever, we have been given a home, and a place in His house. Because Jesus became the exile in our place. He became the leper, the outcast, the sinner, and hung alone on the cross. But He did so that in His resurrection not only *He* would rise from the dead, but that in His resurrection He would bring all of us back to life from the dead, too. That in Him we not only have a new life, but be part of a new people, where **"there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female,"** but **"all are one in Christ Jesus."** (Galatians 3:28)

And so we are part of a new colony - not of lepers, but of the baptized. The body of Christ throughout the world, no matter what color, what nationality, whether rich or poor, educated or uneducated. As we gather around this altar, we are one. One in a marvelous, mystical fellowship. A fellowship only Christ can create.

That's the fellowship that St. Paul had with the Philippian Christians. They had nothing in common but Christ - but as one in Christ, they shared everything and were the blessing of God to one another. That in our abundance we can share with those in need; and in our need we can be provided for from the abundance of others. Those are times of testing - like with Israel in the wilderness - sent by our Lord to work good. To exercise our faith in trusting, in giving, and in receiving. That our fellowship be not of words only, but of deeds; and not of deeds only, but of love. For so it is with Christ Jesus: the *Word* made *flesh* in *love*. And as He raised us to new life in Him, so it is with us: the Word is enfleshed in us that we may live in love.

And that is what we see in the Samaritan leper who was healed - he didn't return and give thanks and praise to Jesus because he had to, but because that's now who he was; he could do nothing else. And so too you and me. We're not here tonight because we have to be, but because this is who we are. Because Jesus brought God to us poor, sinful lepers, because we could not go to Him. Because Jesus had mercy on us and gave us a new life. Because Jesus is here for us tonight in His Body and blood, that we may eat and live. And as we receive Him tonight, with the forgiveness and life He brings, we then will rise and go, cleansed and made whole. That our lives, too, like the Philippians, may be **a fragrant offering** of good works,

opening our hearts in love and our mouths in praise. For truly, ***God has - and will continue - to supply every need of ours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*** Therefore to our God and Father be all glory, honor, thanks, and praise, with the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.