

23 November 2011
Eve of National Thanksgiving

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Feast before the Feast”
Text: Luke 17:11-19

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

Tonight is the feast before the feast. *Tomorrow* we will give thanks and feast on an abundance of food that our Lord has graciously given us. We will give thanks that each and every day He answers our prayer: *give us this day our daily bread*. Tomorrow will be daily bread on steroids! As we feast till we can feast no more, and then fall asleep on the couch.

But tonight is the feast *before* the feast. *Tonight* we give thanks and feast on the Body and Blood of our Lord. We feast on His forgiveness and life. We give thanks that He has so graciously answered ALL our prayers, providing not only what we need for this body and life, but for our spiritual life, our faith, and an abundance more.

Unlike tomorrow's feast, we will not leave this table, this altar, stuffed to the gills. We receive but a small amount here. But here, less is really more. And here, this feast does not cause us to fall asleep. We will fall asleep in death, one day, all of us. But this feast isn't the cause, but the remedy, for that! This feast means that we will wake up from the sleep of death to eternal life! For the Body and Blood that we feast on here did just that, rising from the sleep of death, never to die again.

And when we do, then will begin our big feast - the wedding feast of the Son in His kingdom. The feast that will have no end.

The feast before the feast.

But is there not also fast before the feast? There is. Because of sin. Sin that robs us of all that God wants to give us.

The lepers in the Holy Gospel knew of such a fast. Their life, you could say, was one big fast. They weren't allowed to be with others. No family, no home, no job. Only their fellow lepers were their companions. Fellow lepers suffering as they did. Fellow lepers which could be here today and gone tomorrow. A constant reminder

of the mortality that faced them all. Each day, one day closer to the end. Lepers lived a fast that had no good end.

UNTIL Jesus came along! And with Him, everything changes. He tells them to go and show themselves to the priests, and as they go, they are cleansed. And for them, the feast begins! They have been set free. They are given their life back again. They can go home to their families. And nine of the ten, it seems, cannot wait! Their walk to the priests probably turned into running to their homes, to embrace wives and children they hadn't embraced in who knows how long!

And then there is that one. Who comes back to Jesus. Who pauses and kneels before Him in humble gratitude. He knows there is a feast waiting for Him at home - a feast of love and joy that until this day He could only dream about having again. But first, He comes for the feast before the feast. He comes to Jesus in worship and thanksgiving. For in mercy, Jesus healed him, and in grace, gave Him eternal life!
Rise, go you way, your faith has saved you.

And so it is with us, in a way. Our sin is like leprosy, causing us pain and suffering and hardship. Some of it from no fault of our own, imposed on us. Some of it we bring upon ourselves, from our own failings. Like the lepers, sins causes division of families, friends, marriages, even churches. It causes emptiness and loneliness. It causes pain and death. And worst of all, division from our heavenly Father.

UNTIL the Son of God came, to provide us the healing that we need, the forgiveness of our sins. To give us our life back again. To reunite us with our Father. To give us hope and a future. He did it with a fast before the feast. He left His home and throne and all the heavenly host, and came down to us in our misery - this leper colony of sinners, and lived with us. Yet He not only lived with us, He became one of us. He took our sin upon Himself, and suffered the separation and dereliction of the cross. Until He said: *It is finished*. And then with His resurrection, the feast begins. And we lepers have a home again, and a feast which will have no end.

But tonight, like that leper, we kneel in humble gratitude. *Repentant joy*, the liturgy calls it. For in Jesus, it is now our joy to repent. Knowing that however great our sin, the mercy and love of our Saviour and His feast of forgiveness is even greater. And is yours. And so to you, too, is said: ***Rise, go you way, your faith has saved you.*** Gift given. Gift received.

Tonight we began by singing the words: *Forgive us Lord for shallow thankfulness* (LSB #788), and we confessed our sins. We sang after that: *Thanks to Thee, O Christ, Victorious!* (LSB #548) and acknowledged the great mercy and love of Jesus in giving us the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of eternal life. And we will conclude

tonight by singing: *Sent forth by God's blessing* (LSB #643), for like the lepers, we are sent forth into the world with all that we have here received. To confess our faith, to forgive as we have been forgiven, and to “give honor to Christ and His name that we bear” (LSB #643 v. 2). For that is our true thanksgiving. Not just to come here and say it, but to go out and live it. That in body and soul and with all our being, we *give thanks to the Lord for He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever!* (Psalm 118)

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.