

November 2015
Eve of National Thanksgiving

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“What You *Have*, Not What You *Don't*”

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

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

Abraham Lincoln issued his famous decree establishing a Day of National Thanksgiving 152 years ago. But he wasn't the first. Moses beat him two it by a few thousand years!

We heard from Moses in the reading from Deuteronomy, which is the sermon Moses preached to the people of Israel on the border of the Promised Land. After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, they were finally about to enter this *good land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranites, of olive trees and honey, in which they will eat bread without scarcity and lack nothing, who stones are iron and out of whose hills they would dig copper.* When you go in, when the Lord brings you in - for it is His doing, after all; when you *eat and are full, you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land he has given you.*

Or in other words, have a day of Thanksgiving. For that is what “bless the Lord” means. When the word bless is used from the greater to the lesser, gifts are given. When it is used from the lesser to the greater, thanks are given for the gifts, the blessings, bestowed. And so it is here. Give God thanks for all that He has done, Moses says - and not just in now giving you this land, but for the past 40 years. Because for the past 40 years, what had the Lord done? Moses reminded them: *He fed them with manna. Their clothes did not wear out and their foot did not swell.* In other words, He provided for their every physical need.

But they hadn't been giving Him thanks all along. In fact, as you read through the accounts of their journey in Exodus and Numbers, it is one long litany of groaning, grumbling, and complaining. Constantly. **Not because of what they had, but because of what they didn't have.** That was their focus. In their minds, all the gifts they had paled in comparison to what they didn't have, what they wanted and thought they needed - which stifled their thanksgiving.

Which (if you're like me) you can completely understand. How often do the gifts we have take a back seat in our minds to what we don't have, what we want, and what we think we need? And stifle our thanksgiving.

I don't know if the Philippians were having the same problem. It's possible, maybe even probable, they were, if the people in Moses' day did and we today do. So Paul said to them (and to us): ***Pray and let your requests be made known to God.*** Nothing wrong with that. But, he says, do it not with grumbling, groaning, and complaining, but ***with thanksgiving.*** And then he goes on to tell them not to think about what they don't have, but ***whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.***

Now what makes Paul's words here remarkable is that he wrote them while in prison. It certainly would have been easy for him to grumble, groan, and complain; to think about all he could be doing if he weren't under house arrest, if God would have just worked out everything better - if his focus were on what he didn't have, like his freedom. Instead, focusing on the gifts he has, both from God and from the Philippians, he celebrates a Thanksgiving, of sorts, right there in prison. Thanking God for the concern and gifts of the Philippians - what he does have - and giving glory to God. He is content, he says, because wherever he is and however he is, he knows that God is working good. The eyes and heart may question that, but faith says yes.

Which leads us to the third reading for this night, and the faith of the Samaritan leper. We are not told why the other nine did not return and gives thanks for their healing. Maybe they were too excited to return to their families and loved ones; maybe they wanted to do what Jesus told them to do, and show themselves to the priests; or maybe their mamas didn't raise them right and it just didn't enter their minds. We don't know. But the gifts of God are given to all and **not taken back** because of ungratefulness. Which is good news not just for the world, but for us as well - when we forget or take for granted. God continues to provide sun and rain, food and drink, clothing and shoes, house and home, spouses and children, and so many good gifts. To believers and unbelievers alike. For that's who He is: a giving God, who loves to give and can't stop giving.

But in his returning and giving thanks, the Samaritan leper wasn't better than the rest, but received another gift - this one too given by grace, but received only through faith. Our English translations rendered Jesus' words: ***Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.*** But all ten lepers were made well, and as I said, Jesus didn't take back his gift because of their ingratitude. So a more literal translation there would be better: *Rise and go, your faith has saved you.*

For that's the bottom line. All the gifts of God aren't the point, and the healing of these ten men from their leprosy wasn't the point. And Jesus didn't have to come to give those gifts. He had been giving those kinds of gifts all throughout the Old Testament, including healing from leprosy. But Jesus did have to come for this: to save. To save from sin. To lay down his life on the cross for the salvation of the whole world. And again note: for the whole world. This gift is for all people as well. But unlike the other

gifts, is received only through faith. So by returning, the Samaritan leper received much more than physical healing from leprosy. He got Jesus.

And very soon now you'll receive that gift tonight too. We're not better than everyone else because we're here tonight and they're not. That's a prideful temptation so easy to fall into. But by being here tonight, as we give thanks, as we bless the Lord, we get this too: Jesus. His Body and Blood given and shed *for* you, will be given *to* you, placed into your mouths and poured over your lips, for the forgiveness of your sins. And there is no better gift than that. For all the other gifts, the gifts of this world and life, will pass away. But this gift will not. This gift, this Jesus, will bless us both here and beyond this life, to that life which has no end.

So let us bless the Lord, for all His gifts. Whether you're on the journey or on the border of passing to the next land, the next life, whether free or in prison, or with or without disease. Be we single or married, employed or unemployed, at home or away from home . . . It's not about what you don't have, but what you do. And this you do: Jesus. No matter what else happens, or comes or goes, you have Him. And when you have Him, you have His life, His home, and His salvation. You have it now, and you'll have it forever.

So let us bless the Lord! Thanks be to God!

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