

“Giving Him Thanks”

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: On October 3rd, 1789 President George Washington issued the first proclamation recommending to the citizens of these United States of America that we observe a national day of Thanksgiving on Thursday, November 26th of that same year. He did this at the near unanimous request of both houses of Congress. It seems that back then they could actually find things on which they could agree. Considering the current state of political affairs in our nation’s capital, I seriously doubt that a similar overwhelmingly popular request of the president could be made today – even on so obvious issue as this: our need to give thanks to Almighty God for the countless blessings he has bestowed upon us as a people and a nation. And that’s a pity because since that first national Thanksgiving Day our list of things for which we ought to be grateful has grown exponentially.

Fortunately even without happy harmony prevailing among the political elites in Washington, we as a people still recognize the wisdom and propriety of setting aside a day to reflect upon the generous providence of God who created us, who gives us all things, and who continues to guard and keep us as we said earlier “only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in [us]. For all this it is [our] duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him.”

It’s noteworthy that Luther put *thanks* first of that list of our proper responses to God. I suspect it’s because *thanks* is usually the first thing we forget. So immersed are we in his many blessings, so much are they like part of the air we breathe, it’s easy for us to take them for granted. And the funny thing is that the more we have, the less we are likely to be grateful. We see this truth so clearly displayed in spoiled children. All too often we fail to see it in ourselves – which again, is why we see the need to stop periodically, take inventory, count our many blessings one by one, and consider what life would be like without them. That’s how one learns to be truly grateful. As the song goes, “You don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone.” It’s best to learn gratitude *before* they are gone.

And if this is true with respect to our material blessings, all that God provides for us in the natural world, that is to say, those First Article of the Creed items; how much more should we be grateful for the spiritual blessings God freely gives us for Christ’s sake, the Second Article items that pertain forgiveness, life, and salvation? We who have always known the riches of the pure Gospel, how we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone who achieved everything necessary for our salvation by his passion, death, and resurrection – we who have always been wrapped in this perfect security, are the least likely to be grateful for it. I’ve found that the most ardent Lutherans are those who converted from some other form of spirituality, one that stressed the role of the believer in achieving salvation in part or whole. Such views put a person on an endless treadmill of urgently doing, and bouncing between pride for victories won and despair for sin and failures, leaving them in doubt and hopelessness. Try to imagine what that would be like and you will better learn gratitude for what you have.

This is all true. But what I’d really like to direct your thoughts to this evening is the difference between being grateful and giving thanks. They aren’t the same thing. And we see this difference displayed in the account of Jesus cleansing the ten lepers. So let’s unpack the story a bit.

What's called "leprosy" in the Bible could be one of a dozen or more different diseases that were all given the same name. All of them are contagious to some degree, and back in those days none of them was curable. To be diagnosed as a leper, though, was like a slow death sentence. According to the Law of Moses, the victim had to immediately leave his home, his family, and his friends, and live as an outcast away from any settled area. Anything he left behind – any article of clothing, the bed on which he slept – all that had to be burned. The victim was required to wrap his hands and face – any exposed skin – in strips of cloth. This was both to spare people from viewing the unsightly progression of the disease and also to act as a visual warning sign to them not to approach too closely. The victim further was required to warn healthy people inadvertently coming near audibly by crying out "Unclean! Unclean!" Victims of leprosy survived on handouts left by family and friends at designated drop off points.

Such was the miserable existence of the ten leprous men we encounter in the text. Driven from the comforts of home and more painfully from the people they love, they have banded together for camaraderie and mutual support. For them it's share and share alike. The one thing that unites them, their terrible disease, is even stronger than their former prejudices. They have even allowed a lowly Samaritan into their company. And why not? It's hard to be prideful and look down on others when you are slowly rotting away and the thing you fear the most is seeing your own reflection in the pool of water you drink from. You can be sure of this: these men learned the hard way to be grateful for all the things they used to take for granted and then lost.

But into their otherwise hopeless world has come some potentially good news. Word has come to what's left of their ears of a miracle working Rabbi named Jesus. They say that as he travels about through Galilee he drives out demons, gives sight to the blind, heals the limbs of the lame, and yes – if the reports are true – that he cleanses lepers. Some are whispering that he might very well be the long promised Savior of God's people Israel. For several weeks the ten of them talk together about the news they continue to hear, building up their hope and anticipation if it's all true, and at the same time creating in them a sense of guarded foreboding that it's not. They've suffered enough disappointments in life. They don't want another.

Then comes word that Jesus will be coming soon. He's on his way to Jerusalem, and the place they call home – on the no man's land on the border between Galilee and Samaria – is on his intended route. For a number of days they patiently stake out a place near but respectfully distant from the trail he will be taking as he passes by in route from one village to the next. They mean to make sure they are there waiting when he comes by.

And then at last they see him walking in the midst of a large group of his disciples and followers. Their hopes are high. In chorus they cry out from a distance not the required call of "Unclean!" but rather the prayer of fledgling faith, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

What I always find interesting is that in the accounts we have, Jesus rarely heals people of a particular affliction in the same way. Restoring sight to one blind guy, he'll do one thing. Doing the same thing to someone else, he uses a different method. The reason is that there's usually a spiritual illustration involved. We know that another time he healed a man of leprosy, he did it by doing the unthinkable thing of reaching out and touching him. The man was healed instantly. In this case, Jesus doesn't touch anybody. Instead he keeps his distance and tells the ten afflicted men to go show themselves to the priests, who were the Lord's appointed agents to legally determine who was leprous and who was not. And so it happens that as they are going they are cleansed. Their healing is not instantaneous; it happens over a period of time as they're walking along.

And so you've got to picture these guys going along as a group. They notice the farther they go, the better they are getting. So, the natural inclination is to keep going in that direction. After a while, they're practically running to see the local priest. They want to have themselves declared clean so that they can then return to their homes and loved ones. After what they've suffered, there is no doubt that all of them are profoundly grateful for the gift of healing they have received.

But only one of them, when he sees that he's been healed completely, thinks to turn around and go back to give thanks to Jesus who healed him. The others were thankful *for* the gift. This lone Samaritan was thankful *to the giver of the gift*.

In my home we have a holiday tradition. As we sit down to enjoy the customary feast, we go around the table and each person states something that they are particularly grateful *for*. It's a good tradition that I urge you to adopt if you don't practice it already. But we call this holiday *Thanksgiving*. This year as you pause to count your blessings and consider all you have to be grateful for, don't forget to give thanks to Him to whom you are grateful: God the Father who created and sustains you, God the Son who redeemed you with his precious blood, and God the Holy Spirit who sanctifies and keeps you in the one true faith unto life everlasting. In His holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!