

"Thankful Lives"

Luke 17:11-19

October 14, 2007

There is a story about mother and her 4-year-old daughter who enjoying a day out in a city that had an open-air market. It was harvest season on one of the stalls held a beautiful display of fresh picked oranges. As the little girl stared at the large pile of oranges, a generous vendor took one from the table and gave it to her. "What do you say to the nice man?" the mother asked her daughter. The little girl looked at the orange, then thrust it toward the man and said, "Peel it!"

I thought that it might seem as though we are 'jumping the gun' by focusing on a thanksgiving theme today - it's not even November - it is more than a month until the official holiday. I felt as though it might have worked a bit better to have today's Gospel saved for use at the appropriate time. This account of the healing of ten lepers is used a lot at Thanksgiving - it is a good annual reminder of our need to be thankful to God before we gorge ourselves on turkey, mashed potatoes and all of the trimmings. Of course, we always suggest that 'giving thanks' is not something that should be reserved only for an annual nation wide festival. But then, a lot of us have been raised to keep our nose to the grind stone and not waste a lot of time with too much of that emotion stuff.

I suspect that you have heard the story of the old farmer who, with his wife, was celebrating fifty years of married life. Life on a farm had been meager and they had always been very conservative in everything that they did. You really have to be pretty frugal. But it was their 50th Anniversary - it was time to go all out. Their children gave them a wonderful party during which lots of friends congratulated the honored couple. They looked at old pictures, brought out old phonograph records. The fifty-year couple even danced a bit to the old, familiar music. When the party was over and all had gone home the happy couple found them selves alone. It was a tender moment. The old farmer, who was careful with his money and even more frugal with his words, felt moved to speak. "You know, Ma, over these fifty years, sometimes I've loved you so much that I could hardly keep from telling you." She reached for a hankie, dabbed her eyes and said: "Thank ya', Pa."

I don't know why we are often reserved with our expressions of gratitude. Thankfulness is a powerful thing. It is hard to express how much I appreciate the expressions of thankfulness on Pastor Appreciation Sunday that you shared last Sunday. Such words of thanks are moving - and more than that, they do really change our lives.

Ten lepers call out to Jesus as he passes by. By law, because in those days they believed that leprosy was very contagious, anyone who contracted the disease had to move out of town and stay a certain distance away from anyone who did not have the disease. The lepers were isolated and forced to announce their uncleanness anytime a 'clean' person came near. But they approach Jesus and Jesus has compassion on them. These were all 'god fearing' people in a society in which faith and God were central. When there was a possibility that the disease was cured, verification came from the temple priest, not the local doctor. In loving compassion, Jesus performs a miraculous healing of all ten and sends them off to see the priest. I am sure that all ten must have been incredibly thankful - all went off to see if the priest would declare them clean so that they could return to their families and their community. And, no doubt, the priest would have been surprised by their new cleanness - for they were all healed. But something else happened to the one who returned. We noted in our Wednesday morning discussion of these texts that there is a difference between the statement about having been made clean and Jesus' comment about the 10th leper's faith having made him well. Clean is one thing - but 'well' seems to be something different all together. God, in His loving grace cleanses and forgives - our gratitude or lack of gratitude will not shape the mercy of God. Yet God wants more - God wants us to be well.

I have heard of people speaking about "an attitude of gratitude" - it is a cute catch phrase. But I do believe that it is God's desire that our lives be transformed by thankfulness. I believe that God wants 'well-ness' for us as we find our hearts and lips filled with thankfulness as a reflection of our understanding that God daily provides.

In our adult Sunday School class we have been studying Luther's Large Catechism. I am always amazed to note that every commandment is explained with the words "We are to fear and love God" Everything that we do is shaped by our relationship to God. When we get to the Lord's prayer, we will see Luther explain the things that we pray for with another repeated phrase: "To be sure" *"To be sure, God's name is holy itself ...To be sure, the kingdom of God comes of itself, without our prayers ...To be sure, the good and gracious will of God is done without our prayer ...To be sure, God provides daily bread, even to the wicked, without our prayer..."* To be sure, to be sure, to be sure! God's gifts come to us despite our unfaithfulness and often without our prayers. Paul quotes an ancient Christian hymn in his second letter to Timothy: "If we are faithless, he remains faithful - for he cannot deny himself (2 Timothy 2:13)." Our faithlessness and ingratitude cannot make of God something that he is not. To be sure! As we come to see the 'sureness' of God's constant provision should it not overflow in thankful recognition of blessings received?

I read that Billy Graham once wrote about a theologian named Matthew Henry who at an old age was mugged on the street corner. That night Henry wrote in his diary, *"Let me be thankful first because I was never robbed before; second, although they took my purse, they did not take my life;*

third, because although they took my all, it was not much; and fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed."

The article went on to say "To overlook the good in our lives is to state that there is no one to thank. To grumble is to emphatically declare that there is someone to hold responsible. Which will it be? It is interesting that we teach our children to be thankful and not to complain; we advise them not to overlook the many blessings in their lives. But why do we want our children to observe something we struggle to explain away? To be thankful is to recognize that the blessing is bigger than me, that there is something or someone working beyond me."

In Love all ten are washed clean - one becomes well as he responds to the ever present mercy of God. May we all be made well!

AMEN