

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23)
St. Luke 17:11-19

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The lesson today is one of my favorites, and I confess that I made that statement sarcastically. It's not that I don't appreciate what's going on or that I don't like what it has to say and wish to deny it. It's a fantastic event in the life of Jesus, and one which bears full attention (are there any other kind?). But, as concerns my profession, it comes up twice in lectionary this year, which means there's a good chance that I'll preach on it twice. So, I best get to it.

Jesus heals the ten lepers on His way to Jerusalem passing through the region of Samaria. You know the lesson well enough, as you hear it every year on the National Day of Thanksgiving, appropriate for the day based on the one leper who, as he is being cleansed on his way to the priests, turns around and bows at the Great Physician and High Priest's feet in thanksgiving.

Now, like I said, you know it well enough, but as is often the case with well known texts, you know it so well that you can easily lose the details of what happened. To direct you to those details, I invite you to take note of what Jesus did as well as what He didn't do.

Jesus approached these men as He passed through Samaria. Lepers were supposed to stay at a distance from those not afflicted with the disease and shout to them to stay away because they were unclean. Certainly, you've heard pastor after pastor, teacher after teacher, say this. Well, these ten stayed at a distance from Jesus, but their shouts to Him indicated that they knew who He was: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

"Y'shua," they called Him. It was a common name at the time; probably about as common as the name Joshua is today, or even moreso; it is, after all, the Hebrew form of Joshua. It may have been common enough that had they just guessed that this Man's name was Jesus, they had a good chance of getting it right. "YHWH Saves," it means, for He will save His people from their sins. (cf. Matthew 1:21) This Man will save His people from their sins. And, there's a good chance that word of what this Jesus did got to these lepers—that He cast out demons, raised the dead, and healed diseases. In any event, the lepers knew that this was not any other Y'shua, though, and didn't just guess at His name, because they also called Him Master.

Y'shua, Master, is not any other Jesus or Joshua. This Jesus is the Master, God-in-the-flesh. Jesus is the Master over all creation—it was made through Him and by Him. In Him all creation lives and moves and has its being. (cf. Acts 17:28) The lepers were calling out to this Jesus, the Master, the Word of God, through and by whom all creation was called into being. He could have mercy on them. A simple word from Him by which all things were created, and they could be healed and restored.

And Jesus spoke that simple word. "Go and show yourselves to the priests."

Off they went, all ten of them. There was only one reason why someone unclean would, with haste, make his way back into civilization and show himself to a priest. The priest would declare the unclean person clean, fit to rejoin society, healed, restored to the life he was forced to leave because of leprosy. Again, you have heard that many, many times before. Jesus didn't tell them that they were healed; He told them to go to the priests, and on their way, He took their leprosy from them. He would take this wage of sin from them and be pierced with it to the cross, where He would die for their sins, and not theirs only, but for the sins of the world!

You might imagine their joy as they rushed off into the city. All that was taken from them when they received their leprosy would be returned to them. Who wouldn't be ecstatic and seek to return to that as quickly as possible?

To put it bluntly, one of those ten, that's who. Realizing that he was healed, he returned to Jesus, fell at His feet, and gave Him thanks. And this man was a Samaritan! The priests would still be there when he was done. His life would still be returned to him once he had thanked Jesus. But while He had the time and the knowledge of the presence of God-in-the-flesh in his midst, he was going to turn back and give Him thanks.

"Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner? Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well." Or, more literally translated, "Your faith has saved you," Jesus told the man.

Now, while the nine lepers who didn't return are often called ungrateful, you might want to reconsider calling them that. Luke didn't say that they received healing without thanks. If nothing else, to put the best construction on the nine, they simply didn't return to show their gratitude. It might be that they were ungrateful, or maybe they were grateful but never expressed it or did so after all the excitement of being cleansed had passed, or maybe they simply didn't express any thanks at all (I mean, do you ever express your thanks for every single thing God has done and given to you?); the truth is, only God knows.

All Luke recorded is that they ran back into the city, presumably to do exactly what Jesus had told them to do. He didn't write that they were thankful nor unthankful. Perhaps, having been cleansed and with having the thought of returning to their families and lives foremost in their minds, gratitude was not preeminently on their mind. While that's hardly an excuse for their perceived ill behavior, Luke's silence does at least allow these men to be painted in a more favorable light. Still, ingratitude, in any shape or form, is a symptom of the sinful condition that infects all men like leprosy—it is sin.

Presumably, the Samaritan now cleansed, and having thanked Jesus, showed himself to the priests and was returned to his former life. Luke doesn't say one way or another, and his silence in this regard is telling. If the man had not gone to the priests as he was directed, it's likely, I think, that Luke would have written as much; that would be a very important detail with some potential theological weight, but nothing I need to get into for the sake of this sermon.

The same can be said for the other nine. Presumably, they showed themselves to the priests and returned to their former lives. If anything different had happened to them, Luke probably would have written so. Again, his silence is telling; you are given no other option but to believe that the nine so-called ungrateful lepers were healed and restored to civilized life.

Therefore, you can only confess that this is what Jesus did: He healed all ten. All ten lepers were cleansed by Jesus, and by His cleansing were given a new lease on life!

Likewise, you can only confess that this is what Jesus didn't do: He didn't rescind His word for the nine that didn't return to thank Him. He didn't return their affliction to them.

Again, based on the whole corpus of the Scriptures, you can also only confess that Jesus took the leprosy of all ten—in fact the wages of sin of all men—and paid the full price for all sins on the cross on Golgotha. There, having been beaten and whipped and crowned with thorns, this now unclean Man was nailed to the cross and made the ultimate Sacrifice for the sins of the world. He suffered the full wrath of the Father in the place of sinful man and won for them His Father's favor and grace and mercy, having died the death due each one. Therefore, for His own sake, this Great High Priest declares you clean, for He has done the work to make you clean—He makes you clean!

What can you learn from this? Well, let me repeat Luther's explanation to the First Article of the Creed.

I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him.

The Father has given you everything that you have. Even Luther's enumeration pales in comparison to the gamut of God's blessings to you—physical, temporal, emotional, spiritual, or however you would like to classify all that you have from the hand of God. You have everything—EVERYTHING—by the hand of God. Is there work that you do to obtain and maintain any of it? Sure, but it is all directed and given to you by the hand of God.

Furthermore, all that God has given you, you have regardless of any merit or worthiness in you. Whether God deems that you deserve something or not because of what you have done or left undone, because of who you are or how you are, He still gives you what you have—all that you need. Your merit or worthiness does not determine God's grace and mercy to you. You are His child, His creation—in Him you live and move and have your being—and He gives to you out of His fatherly, divine goodness and mercy.

For all of this it is your duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him. Any thanksgiving and praise you have for your heavenly Father comes to you by way of His grace and mercy. It flows and stems from what God has done to you and for you and on you. When you pray the Lord's Prayer, you pray that He would lead you to realize that what you have is from Him so that you can rightly thank Him for it.

It follows, then, since what you have is from His hand regardless of worthiness or merit in you, that your receiving and continuing to receive from Him and your holding on to what He has given you is not determined by your thankfulness. God does not rescind His blessings because you failed to thank Him for them or even acknowledge Him as the giver of all good. No, "For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." (Matthew 5:45b) Certainly, the evil and unjust would not thank God for the sun and rain, much less acknowledge that He sent either; yet He still gives these even to them, and much more.

This extends even to the Son. For God loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son. (cf. John 3:16) What can anyone say about themselves and their condition that God would love everyone so that He would send His Son as a propitiation for the sins of the world? (cf. 1 John 2:2) Nothing. I mean, if anyone here were in God's place, you would be hard-pressed not to throw your hands up in disgust and forget about the whole creation. Thankfully, you are not in God's place, and He didn't just give up on you; God's senses of justice and grace and mercy far outweighs yours. To that end, He loved you to death, the death of His Son!

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
(Romans 5:6-8)

Now, for the sake of His Son, Jesus Christ, the Father declares you clean. You have been washed in the blood of the Lamb, and your robes are as white as snow! Yes, you are reconciled! "[W]hen we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son..." (Romans 5:10a NKJV) You are like the lepers, who for the sake of Jesus, Master, were cleansed at His word—for it is by a word that you are cleansed: "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy

Ghost” and “I forgive you your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.”

So, which of the ten lepers are you? Well, nine times out of ten, I would say you are a so-called ungrateful leper. Oh, it’s not always that you mean to be thankless toward Jesus for His Sacrifice on your behalf; thankfulness simply rarely comes to mind, even in a setting like this.

Perhaps that’s a result of the sinful nature’s reaction to the repetitious nature of the liturgy; week-in-and-week-out you come here and you hear of the forgiveness of your sins, and you sing your amens and thanksgivings, and it has all become so routine that you do it mindlessly. “Did I just thank God for His Son? It may have sounded like it, but did I really do it?” This is no excuse, but it does paint you as an ungrateful lot, and speaks volumes of the sinful condition which you carry with you by way of the Old Adam. Ingratitude toward God, intended or not, is sin. I mean, it is your duty to thank and praise, serve and obey God for His first article gifts; how much more for His second article gifts—the forgiveness, life, and salvation that is yours by way of the Son?

Thankfully, Jesus does not rescind His Baptism or Absolution for your ingratitude. Thankfully, Jesus does not make His body and blood of no effect for you, and especially not of ill effect, for your thanklessness. To do so would mean that your salvation depends on you and your thankfulness. On the contrary, your salvation is wholly and completely dependent on the Word of God. Jesus says a thing, and it is done. Jesus has come to forgive sins, and your ingratitude, even for His forgiveness, is among the sins He forgives—for He forgives *all* sins.

This is the Article on Justification from the Augsburg Confession:

Also [our churches] teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight.

You have justification and righteousness, forgiveness and salvation, for *Christ’s* sake, by *Christ’s* work, through *Christ’s* merits, because He has given you faith to believe it.

So, by His command, you were baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost; you may not have uttered “Thank you, Jesus,” but your baptism is still valid. Now, daily as the baptized child of God, by contrition and repentance, that Old Adam drowns and a new man daily emerges to live before God in righteousness and purity because by His command, you are forgiven in the name of the Father and of the Son and of Holy Ghost. Of this you can be certain, for Jesus said, “If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven” (John 20:23a); for this, it doesn’t matter if you gave thanks to God or not. Therefore, having been made worthy by the blood of the Lamb, you are invited to receive your Savior’s body and blood—“Take, eat,” He says, and you eat the bread that is His body; “Take, drink,” He says, and you drink the wine that is His blood—and receiving Christ’s body and blood your faith is strengthened and you receive forgiveness, life, and salvation. Your receiving the gifts of God and their benefits does not depend on your thanking God for these gifts. Jesus tells you what a thing is for you, and that it is—He speaks His grace into you and onto you, and so you receive His grace!

All the same, it is your duty to thank and praise God for it all. Only by His grace are you even able to do so. Thank God for that!

God doesn’t give His Son to you for your sake, but for His. St. John wrote, “[Y]our sins are forgiven you for his name’s sake.” (1 John 2:12b) Therefore, ten times out of ten, you receive the benefits and merits of Jesus Christ your Savior for His Sake, in His merits, by His worthiness, through His Word; that is, the forgiveness of all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.