National Day of Thanksgiving
St. Luke 17:11-19

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

Today's text is a familiar one, perhaps one of the most familiar Gospel lessons. It's read every Thanksgiving, and at times it'll find itself as the appointed Gospel for a Sunday. So, you know likely know well, quite well, what's going on.

As Jesus was traveling, on his way to Jerusalem and Golgotha, He was met by ten men with leprosy, one of whom was a Samaritan. They approached Jesus and asked for mercy rather than shouting for Him to stay away. Jesus immediately told them to go and show themselves to the priest, an indication that, first of all, the other nine men (or most of them) were probably Jews, and second of all, that they were cleansed. So, all ten ran off; however, the Samaritan, realizing that he was healed, pulled a one-eighty and returned to Jesus to thank Him and worship Him. Jesus asked,

> Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?

Gently, one might like to imagine, Jesus looks down at the Samaritan, and tells him to rise, for his faith has made him well. More to the point, the Greek says that the Samaritan's faith has saved him (as common a statement from me as the reading of this text in this place).

So, about these ten men… They had leprosy, which meant they were considered unclean. They were kept away from the rest of civilization, not so much out of fear of the disease (though there was that), but for fear by the rest of civilization of being declared unclean, or unrighteous. They were outcast from their livelihoods, from their homes, from their families, from their friends. So, not only were they sick, not only were they unclean—declared unrighteous—but they were most assuredly brokenhearted, too. To them, all was lost, they were merely waiting for death, unless something miraculous would happen…

They knew who Jesus was, that is clear from the text. Gossip about the Son of God had spread, reaching even into their wilderness of leprosy, such that they knew He was someone who could heal them. The word that spread of Him must have set off little reminders about the prophets indicating that He was the promised Messiah. Free from any other agenda—their only desire was for healing and restoration—they had no reason to see Jesus as a threat to their power base, like His Jewish opponents. Jesus was the one promised by the prophets who could, among other things, give the miracle they desired and needed.

Therefore Jesus asked, "Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

But, let me back up. These ten men ran to Jesus. They didn't shout for Him to stay away, but cried out to Him for mercy, inviting Him to come to them—inviting themselves to be in His presence. What did Jesus do? He did what was promised to be done by the Messiah, as Isaiah wrote, "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted…" (Isaiah 61:1a) He told them to show themselves to the priests.

Now, there's only one reason a leper would do such a thing. It was the priest who gave the diagnosis and proclamation, "You have leprosy, you are unclean." The priest would announce the judgment, "You must leave this town and live away from everyone else." The priest might speak a glimmer of hope, "If by chance you are healed, come to me again, and I will reverse what has been said, restoring you to your livelihoods, your homes, your families, your friends..." That's what the priest would do—that's all he could do—and that's why a leper would have gone to the priest. Therefore, when Jesus told them to go, He was granting their cry for mercy, healing their brokenheartedness—cleansing them.

And the ten ran off. They had to have been overjoyed to hear the wonderful proclamation from the Son of God. You might imagine that they ran to the priest with thoughts of hugging their children once again, being with their wives once again, playing knucklebones with their friends once again—restoration, all because the priest would declare them clean.

Except one… While he certainly started on his way, he did an about face, and returned to give glory to God. The priest would be there later, but first, God-in-the-flesh was right in front him. The healing can be confirmed later for everyone else to see and hear, but, for now, before him was the One who granted the healing.

So, Jesus inquired, "Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Take note of that and realize that He didn't say, "Okay, fine, I take it all back for those other nine." Notice that there are no take-backs when it comes to God. He gives abundantly and never regrets it. Oh, to be sure, He laments thanklessness: "Where are the [other] nine?" He certainly lets up from time to time and allows suffering to take root, such as you can read about in the book of Judges. He gives, because that's who He is. And whenever He gives, He gives cheerfully and abundantly and never takes it back.

The ten lepers knew who Jesus was and trusted that He would heal Him. You could say they had a right faith for that. And Jesus did heal them, not because of their faith, but because that's who He is. Nine of them, however, wavered in their faith, and didn't stay around for all that God in His Son had to give. The one did, and he eventually left the scene not only healed physically but also forgiven and healed for eternal life. Were the other nine ever forgiven and healed for eternal life? Luke never wrote more about them, and this event and these lepers are mentioned nowhere else in Scripture.

What does this mean? God gives all kinds of gifts, and He gives them abundantly. Not only for this day—this National Day of Thanksgiving—but for everyday. He causes rain and snow to fall on whomever He deems, watering the earth which He has also given to all, regardless of faith or standing. He has given to all body and soul, eyes, ears, members, reason, and senses. He gives clothing, shoes, meat, drink, house, home, wife, children, fields, cattle and all goods—everything that everyone has. Furthermore, He provides for the healing of diseased and broken bodies by means of medicines and medical professionals—for believers and unbelievers alike. And He never takes it back, least of all for thanklessness. Does He still allow suffering? Absolutely! Senses and reason and bodies fail. Limbs and eyes can be lost. Life, goods, fame, child, and wife can all be lost. But, when God gives, He always gives cheerfully and abundantly and never takes it back.

But, He has more to give. Nine out of ten times, as the saying goes, the world takes all the sorts of gifts already mentioned and runs away with them. They are so enamored with the good, yet temporal, gifts that God gives, that they ignore the giver of those gifts and don't stick around long enough to receive the most precious gift He has to give: forgiveness in His Son.

Here's the truth that you cannot deny: God is far better at giving that you are at receiving. Do not be deceived: while I stand here accusing the rest of the world of running off with God's abundant temporal gifts and forgetting the rest, and you sit there nodding in agreement (whether only in your heads or actually doing so), I stand here, now, and accuse you of not receiving as well as God gives, and I include myself in that accusation. Remember that God gives abundantly, yet how often do you take the time to thank Him for His bounteous gifts, not just today, but everyday. Sure, today is set aside to take some time to do so, but even today, I suggest that the thought of the fabulous meal that awaits urges the desire for expediency in our service; you can't wait for church to be over so that you can get home and engorge yourselves, and thanklessly, too, I might add, despite it being Thanksgiving Day. Never mind that the world out there has no clue what today is all about, you are easy prey for that temptation, too.

To be sure, you and I are pretty thankless. Nevertheless, God is bountiful and providential. Despite this thanklessness, He continues to provide abundantly. He still gives food for the eater and clothes for the wearer, and He still has the greater gift to give.

So, I call your attention to our Lord in today's Gospel. He did not take back His gift of physical healing from the nine who were thankless, but continued traveling for them. He was making His way to Jerusalem, where He made the sacrifice that pays the price for the most precious gift He has to give at a place called Skull.

He went and died for the nine lepers in today's text. He went and died for the one Samaritan leper who came back immediately to fall and Jesus' feet and give glory to God. He went and died for the world out there who would run away with God's abundant temporal gifts. He went and died for you, dear hearers, who despite turkeys roasting and meals to prepare, have come to receive from your God a gift more sumptuous than turkey and gravy and mashed potatoes and candied yams—the forgiveness of sins by the Son whom He loves, who died and rose again to give to all who would receive by God-given faith forgiveness and salvation, that they might be delivered from death and into eternal life. Thankful or not, this is the gift He has to give you, and by God-given faith, you have received.

Jesus is the Messiah, proclaimed by the prophet Isaiah:

> The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
> because the LORD has anointed me
> to bring good news to the poor;
> he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
> to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound… (Isaiah 61:1)

Therefore, you echo what the prophet also sang:

> I will greatly rejoice in the LORD;
> my soul shall exult in my God,
> for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
> as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress,
> and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
> For as the earth brings forth its sprouts,
> and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up,
> so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
> to sprout up before all the nations. (Isaiah 61:10-11)

Dear hearers, you have been delivered from death and into eternal life by the death and resurrection of the Son of God; you have been clothed in the garments of salvation and covered with the robe of righteousness, washed clean in the blood of the Lamb There is no greater gift, and for it you ought to give thanks and glory to God continually; while all other gifts are good, they pale in comparison to this one thing needful. Therefore, "...take they our life, Goods, fame, child, and wife, Let these all be gone, They yet have nothing won; The kingdom ours remaineth." Your faith has saved you; therefore, eternal life is yours—the kingdom is yours—because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

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