

Sermon for November 19, 2017
Thanksgiving
“A Thankful Heart”

Luke 17:11-19

It's a story of Thanksgiving. One day, Jesus was traveling along the border country between Samaria and Galilee. I am sure I don't need to tell you about the hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans. From the Jewish perspective the Samaritans had forgotten their heritage. Their ancestors had stopped worshipping in Jerusalem and started worshipping in the mountains of the northern kingdom. Their ancestors had stopped following the descendants of David and had seceded and formed their own country. The Samaritans for their part probably didn't like being looked down on by the Jews. After all they had done the best they could to try to stay true to their faith in the face of conquest and occupation just like the Jews.

This was tricky country to be walking through. In this border country they came upon a group of 10 lepers. They stood off at a distance and hollered “Jesus, Master, have pity on us.” Leprosy in that day was worse than a death sentence. Any number of skin ailments could be classified as leprosy. Some were fatal and others extremely irritating. Lepers were required to stay away from people and announce their presence at a distance so that people could throw them food and not come in contact with them. That is why the men called to Jesus and the disciples like this. They apparently had heard of Jesus and thought he could heal them. Maybe someone had thrown them some food and wanting to help hollered back, “There is this Jesus guy from Nazareth who is a great healer. He went that way.”

Sometimes Jesus would actually touch these untouchables of his day to heal them. But in this case, he said “Go show yourselves to the priests.” A leper could be certified “cured” if the priests examined them and found no sign of the leprosy, then they could go through a cleansing ritual and return to their family and life and community. Was Jesus playing a bad joke on them? Shouldn't he heal them first? But they obeyed and as they made their way they were healed.

It must have been a moment of shock and joy! They were cured! They could return to their families and community and lives just as soon as the priests certified the cure. So, they ran to the priests, but one turned back to run to Jesus and thank him. And it turns out this one was one of those despised Samaritans. This is when we discover that this band of lepers was a mixture of Jews and Samaritans. Their common plight brought them together to help one another. When Jesus sees the man he said, “Weren't there 9 of you, but only this Samaritan gave thanks?” Then to the Samaritan he said, “Go, your faith has made you well.”

What was this guy thinking? Think about it. The guy who healed you said, “Go to the priests.” It is as you are going that you are made well. Shouldn’t you finish doing what the guy who healed you told you to do? The healing happened on the way to the priests, what if going in the other direction to return to Jesus undid the healing? Logic dictates that you should go see the priests, then you can find Jesus to thank him.

What was this Samaritan thinking? He wasn’t! That’s the point. He was so overwhelmed by thankfulness that he did not think it through. He just ran to fall at Jesus’ feet and praise God and thank him.

If only we could all be as thankful. True thanksgiving wells up from within us. It impels us to praise God. It drives us to fall at Jesus’ feet and give thanks.

That is what Thanksgiving is all about. It is about a diverse group of people, different in many ways, gathering together out of a spirit of true thankfulness. The Puritans had suffered greatly in the New World. Many of them had died. But the Native Americans had shown them how to farm this new land. And they were able to grow enough food to see them through the next winter.

These Native American were different. They looked different and talked different and dressed different and even worshipped different. I am sure the Native Americans were concerned at first. Here these noisy, smelly, oddly dressed people show up and begin clearing their hunting grounds. But they saw their plight and reached out to this group of religious refugees and helped them.

And they gave thanks. They both faced a long New England winter and the harvest had provided for their needs. So, they gave thanks. Even though they might have questioned if they thanked the same God, they both gave thanks and feasted. Like any true thankfulness, the gratitude overflowed their hearts.

Are we thankful? Like the lepers we have been cleansed. Jesus has redeemed us and brought us into a relationship with God through him. We can know true community and love.

Like the Pilgrims and Native Americans, God has provided for our needs. There is plenty of food and medicine to go around in this world. Most of us will probably eat too much this Thursday. We have grace and peace and love and community.

Are you thankful? If you are thankful and you know it clap your hands. If you are thankful and you know it praise the lord “Amen” And if you are thankful and you know it then your face will surely show it. If you are truly thankful then your heart will overflow with gratitude. My hope and prayer is that all of you will experience that joy of gratitude this Thanksgiving.