

9.1.2024 Trinity 14 (Luke 17:11-19)

The liturgy we celebrate this morning is known by many names: Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, Mass, the Divine Liturgy, and the name I would ask you to consider today: the Holy Eucharist. The word Eucharist means thanksgiving, and so we might say to celebrate the Holy Eucharist is to celebrate a holy thanksgiving to God, and that thought is certainly reflected in the words of this service. The language we use this day is that of a humble, wholehearted, and holy prayer of thanksgiving.

We return to the house of the Lord this morning, to use the words of our liturgy, having in remembrance our Lord's "blessed passion and precious death, His mighty resurrection and glorious ascension," to render unto Him, "most hearty thanks for the innumerable benefits procured unto us by the same." Today, once again, we turn away from ourselves, and turn back to God to thank Him "for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all, for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory." This morning, as we receive the Holy Eucharist, it is our earnest desire that our Father would "accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving."

Thanksgiving to God is an essential part of the Christian life, but have you ever wondered how this desire we have, that moves us to turn back and thank Him, may appear strange to others? In a country where church attendance has fallen to new lows, those of us who left our house this morning to come thank God in His house, are the minority; and when we bow and kneel, stand and sing, pray and lift up our voices to praise His holy name, our actions are very different than the majority of our friends and neighbors.

The desire we have to continually turn back, and offer God praise and thanksgiving, places us in the minority, and that was the thought entered my mind when I read the Gospel appointed for today. The text we read this morning is the story of ten lepers, who seeing Jesus, "*lifted up their voices, and said, Jesus, Master, have mercy on us. And when He saw them, He said to them, Go show yourselves unto the priests. And it came to pass, that, as they went, they were cleansed. And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on*

his face at His feet, giving Him thanks...” (Luke 17:13-16).

The cry of the lepers, “*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us,*” was our three-fold liturgical cry this morning. Today, we cried out, “Lord, have mercy upon us. Christ, have mercy upon us. Lord, have mercy upon us.” In this world we all have good reason to desperately cry out to God, but after receiving His mercies with “*every new morning*” (Lamentations 3:22-23), so few turn back to give thanks. How strange that one leper must have appeared to the nine when he “*turned back*” to thank God in such an extravagant manner, when he “*with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks...*” How strange must we appear to the majority as we do likewise. This, “our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving,” is not common, and therefore we continually pray that God would be so kind, “in this time of our prosperity,” as to “fill our hearts with thankfulness.”

We pray God would give us thankful hearts, for we know that when we turn away from ourselves, and turn back to Him in faith, with voices lifted in thanks and praise, that we are truly healed, because when we return to God in faith, we receive not only the healing, but the Healer, not merely the gift, but the Giver, not only a miracle, but the Miracle Worker. Consider the way that truth is revealed in the Gospel text. To the leper who turned back after being healed, Jesus said, “*Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole*” (Luke 17:19). Literally, our Lord and God said to this leper, Arise, go thy way: “*your faith has saved you*” (LSV).

This cleansed leper who turned back to God in faith to celebrate a holy thanksgiving, received what the majority did not - intimacy with God. Remember this passage began with the ten lepers all standing “*afar off*” (Luke 17:12). They didn’t approach Jesus because the unclean were commanded by the law to remain at a distance. So these men “*lifted up their voices,*” cried out, “*have mercy on us,*” and the text gives us no indication that our Lord approached them, touched them, or spoke personally with them. The text simply states that “*when He saw them, He said to them, Go show yourselves unto the priests,*” and they did, all except one. One leper, *when he saw that he was healed, turned back* to draw near to God, to offer his sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, and to the one, Jesus spoke directly and personally, saying, “*your faith has saved you.*”

Now, in our day, when we turn back to God to thank Him in His house, we often begin with a prayer that states, “O God of peace, who hast taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved,” and those words, which were spoken by the prophet Isaiah (30:15), are exemplified by the cleansed leper. It is in returning to God, and resting in Him, that, like the leper, we shall be saved, and our liturgical celebration of the Holy Eucharist guides us through that faithful journey of return, rest, and communion with God in a holy thanksgiving.

This morning, in a sense we stood “*afar off*” as the service began and we cried out, “Lord, have mercy upon us.” In a few minutes, when we confess our sins, again our liturgical plea will be “Have mercy upon us, Have mercy upon us, most merciful Father...” After our confession, the words of absolution speak of God’s “great mercy,” that He has “promised forgiveness of sins to all those who with hearty repentance and true faith turn unto Him.” St. John assures us of that promise, saying, “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9). So, those who re-turn to God with hearty repentance and true faith are forgiven and cleansed, but at that point in the liturgy we don’t take His merciful gift of healing and rush out the door. Rather, the forgiven and cleansed approach the Lord’s table to celebrate the Holy Eucharist, a holy thanksgiving to God, in which we participate in the intimacy of table fellowship with the God of Heaven and Earth.

Today, the minority, like cleansed lepers, return to God, to celebrate “this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.” With bodies, “made clean by His Body,” and “souls washed through His most precious Blood,” we rejoice in the blessed assurance that God seeks not only our healing, but our intimate fellowship with Him - our Salvation. His desire is that we may “evermore dwell in Him, and He in us.” Therefore, may we, who have by His grace, returned to God in faith, to glorify Him with a loud voice, to praise Him, to thank Him, and to receive Him; before we go may we hear Jesus speak these comfortable words: Arise, go thy way: “*your faith has saved you.*”