

Sermon – Luke 17:11-21
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“It Is Right to Give Our Thanks”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I am a big believer in Cross+Gen ministry, in making sure that God’s people across the generations, of all ages and stages, have the opportunity to interact with one another. The wisdom of the elder and the wonder of the child are a blessing when combined. And I am grateful for all of the wonderful adults who are lovingly involved in the lives of our children, particularly those adults at Grace who share their faith with the Lyle kids. After all, in just a few short years Erika and I will become – in our children’s eyes – the least cool, least understanding, last people they’ll want to be around. So I’m grateful that there will be other adults they’ll be able to trust, to whom they can turn. Having said all of that, I confess that I often feel bad for my kids. They have to spend a lot of time with adults and, when you’re a little kid, being with adults is hard work. Rules must be remembered, customs observed. And for goodness’ sake, don’t forget your manners. So it is that I often find myself saying, whispering, “*And what do you say?*” I say this, of course, to remind them to utter that magical phrase: “Thank you.” Bonus points given if they sounds like they mean it. In fairness to my kids, they’re pretty good at remembering to say this. They’re pretty good, all in all, if I do say so myself. Still, I want to make sure they say “thanks” not simply because I want them to learn the mechanics of successfully navigating human relationships without coming off as ungrateful so-and-sos, but because I want to help them develop a sense of gratitude. Gratitude can turn our lives around; not because we remember to say thank you, but because the gift we

- have received grabs hold of us and will not let us go. Being thankful is ultimately not about the past; it is a redirection toward a surprising, undeserved future.
2. It is tempting to read this morning's gospel text as a sort of parental reminder to be well-mannered. Ten lepers are sent by Jesus to see the priests, and on the way they are made clean. One of them, a Samaritan, returns to Jesus, prostrates himself at Jesus' feet, and says thank you. Jesus, noticing that the other nine are nowhere to be seen, asks, "Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" And there, we might think, is the moral of the story. God has done so much for you, so don't forget to say thank you. Oh, and do tuck in your shirt! But the gospel is not a new set of manners, a new law to replace the old, through which our gratitude wins us the gift of salvation. No, if the gospel is a new law like the old, we're no better off than we were before.
 3. To be sure, being thankful is a good thing. All ten of these lepers would have done well to turn back and say thank you to Jesus. They had much for which to be thankful, for theirs was a sad condition, physically and spiritually. It made a person both unwell and unclean, doubly doomed and therefore entirely shunned. They would have been sent forth from their families, their towns, their lives. They were as good as dead. But while people in the Ancient Near East viewed many conditions as punishments from God, leprosy was viewed in a different way. The preacher Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Leprosy was not seen, however, as a punishment for sin. It was understood instead as an inexplicable act of God, which made it even more frightening. If there was nothing you did to deserve leprosy then it followed that there was nothing you could do to avoid it, and so lepers were shunned – because their disease was contagious, certainly, but it was more than that. It was their pain, their loneliness, their unspeakable fear no one wanted to catch, and so they were kept at a distance, barred from the religious community, and declared

unworthy of God.” Unworthy of God. Aren’t we all? The lepers of Jesus’ day and their modern-day untouchable counterparts are kept cut off from community so that the rest of us can feel better about ourselves. At least we’re not like them!

4. Jesus has mercy on the ten lepers. On all of them. He heals them, and returns them to their homes, by way of the priests who would declare them lepers no more. And nine, it seems, do exactly that. I have no need to judge them, and the text does not demand that we slide into too-easy moral condemnation, tousling their hair and muttering in their ears, “Now what do you say?” They remain cured of their leprosy, and their eternal fate is unknown. I like to imagine them running into the arms of spouses they have not seen in years, scooping up children they have long been unable to hold. And I like to think that just maybe, after more of the story unfolded, they thought again of this Jesus who had mercy on them. But this morning the text focuses our eyes on the one, the Samaritan, and *his* eyes are fixed upon Jesus. Why did this one return to Jesus? Perhaps because, as a Samaritan, he had no priest to go to, no religious authority who would declare him clean. His goose was cooked three times over – not only was he physically unwell and spiritually unclean; he was also ethnically unwelcome. *This man simply did not belong.* He may have been upright and walking around but make no mistake: This thrice-cooked goose was a dead duck.
5. Then again, cooked geese and dead ducks are right up Jesus’ alley. Jesus does his best work – his only work, really – with those who are dead. With Samaritan lepers and the strung-out homeless; with tax cheats and deadbeats; with actual corpses and even with you and with me. Make no mistake, you and I have been dead. In sin and suffering, received and inflicted, ensnared unavoidably by the mortality that stalks us all. Keeping the lepers away won’t save us. We might as well join them and claim our common deadness. Good manners won’t save us either. But wouldn’t you

know, Jesus will. Remember how leprosy was thought to be an inexplicable act of God? You aint' seen nothing yet. God, seeing us snared in our sin and suffering, sends his Son to save us. Say that ten times fast! The eternal Word takes on flesh and finitude. Jesus crosses out of heaven into earth, out of Galilee into Samaria, out of purity into uncleanness, out of good manners into the company of sinners, and yes, out of life into death. Jesus crosses every boundary, every border, to get to you. To all of you, each of you. To die to enter your death; to live, that you might enter his life. You, my friends, were dead. And know you are alive. For you, like little Evelyn Rae was this morning, have been joined forever to the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the waters of baptism. It's inexplicable yet wholly predictable. It's just the sort of the thing that a God who is love would do. And God in Christ has done it for you.

6. Yes, it is right to give our thanks. And our praise. That's why we sing these words every Sunday. But these words cannot be reduced to some cheap *quid pro quo* in which God gives us life but demands we straighten up and mind our manners. We give God our thanks and praise because we, like the Samaritan leper, have nowhere else to go and nothing else to say. The faith that saves us is not what we muster from within ourselves. That wouldn't be enough, anyway. No, as Luther writes, neither "we or our faith would be worthy of it, but he shows his inexpressible goodness and willing grace, with which he rouses us to believe in him and, comforted, to expect everything good from him with happy and unwavering confidence...You see, then let yourself grasp and feel his grace – yes, it grasps and touch us!" Friends, Jesus Christ has claimed you for his own. Christ who lives forever the resurrection life has given that life, *freely*, as a gift to you. You are well; you are clean; you are restored; you are alive. We might not have to say thank you. But why wouldn't we? Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.