

Pentecost 21C (10/9/2016)

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c

Psalm 111

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Luke 17:11-19

Faith is gratitude. God is gracious and merciful, even to the ungrateful. So, our faith is not a straining to be worthy of God's goodness, but a response of thanksgiving for the goodness we have already known. Although it can be instinctive, gratitude is also a discipline, a practice. And, as an alternative to anxiety and bitterness, it has the power to transform both ourselves and others.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise!

It is indeed right, our duty and our joy, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks and praise to you, almighty and merciful God, through our savior Jesus Christ....¹

It's no coincidence that the liturgy for Holy Communion begins with a Great Thanksgiving. Holy Communion is also known as the Eucharist, which comes from the Greek word *eucharistia*, meaning "thanksgiving." The good things of God are spread out before us, beckoning us to come, taste and see that the Lord is good.² Regardless of our shortcomings, God feeds us with an abundance of mercy and strengthens us in faith and love. And, when everyone is finished eating and drinking, we pray again: *We give you thanks, almighty God, that you have refreshed us through the healing power of this gift of life.*³ So, our weekly meal together begins and ends with an acknowledgement that the only

¹ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*, Assembly Edition (AE), 107-8.

² Psalm 34:8.

³ *ELW*, AE, 114.

contribution we make to the meal is an offering of gratitude for the grace we receive at the Lord's Table.

God gives, and we give thanks. This pattern not only characterizes the sacrament of Holy Communion, but it also sets the tone for the rest of the week. **When we recognize God's gracious provision in any aspect of our lives, the natural response is to give thanks. Faith, in other words, is gratitude.**

This notion comes to beautiful expression in our Gospel from Luke today. Jesus is traveling through the region between Galilee and Samaria, an ethnically and religiously conflicted area. From the margin, he hears a plea for mercy. Ten lepers, suffering from skin disease and cast out of the community on account of their ritual impurity, stand at a distance and cry out in need of healing and belonging. True to God's compassionate character, Jesus grants their request without question or delay. And immediately, they set out in the direction of the priests to receive confirmation of their healing. But one of them, filled with gratitude, turns back, falls down at Jesus' feet, and thanks him. And he is a Samaritan. "Get up and go on your way," Jesus replies, "your faith has made you well."

It's not immediately clear what Jesus means by "faith" and "wellness." After all, gratitude is not a prerequisite for healing.⁴ The fact that only one of the former lepers returns to acknowledge Jesus does not nullify the healing of the other nine. So, this story insists that **healing is a function of God's compassion, not our faith.** "If we are faithless," Paul reminds Timothy in our second reading today, "God remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself." **God's nature is to be gracious and merciful, even to the ungrateful.**⁵ Nevertheless, in the case of the Samaritan leper, faith and healing take on their fullest

⁴ See Margit Ernst-Habib, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, 166.

⁵ Luke 6:35. See Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 626.

significance in his gratitude. Beholden entirely to Jesus for his new lease on life, he can't help but fall at Jesus' feet and offer praise and thanksgiving. His cup overflows.

So, Jesus' reference to faith and wellness here insists upon a broader understanding of both. **Wellness is not simply the absence of disease. It's an attentiveness to signs of God's loving care, a holistic sense of salvation even under distressing circumstances. And, faith is not a straining to be worthy of God's goodness, but a response of thanksgiving for the goodness we have already known. Faith is gratitude.**

From time to time, gratitude becomes a reflex. Like the Samaritan leper, we can be so suddenly overcome with appreciation that it fills our hearts and overflows into our words and actions. John Burkhart goes so far as to suggest that our inclination toward praise and thanksgiving is essential to our humanity: "To withhold acknowledgement, to avoid celebration, to stifle gratitude, may prove as unnatural as holding one's breath."⁶

But we also have a tendency to suppress gratitude in favor of other responses. In the face of stress or crisis, we defer instead to our self-involvement, our anxiety, our resentment, often becoming so paralyzed by these other impulses that praise and thanksgiving are impossible. So, **gratitude is not only an occasional instinct; it's also a practice, a discipline.**⁷ And like any spiritual exercise, it requires intent and effort. We cannot expect to simply stumble upon an attitude of gratitude; we have to cultivate it.

But, **when we make a point to look for God's blessing in the complexity of our lives, we witness the power of gratitude to transform both ourselves and others.** As I was preparing to preach this week, I came across a Facebook post from a childhood acquaintance who has experienced a great deal of loss. I would not fault her for feelings of bitterness or cynicism, but she has chosen to respond to the events in her life instead with

⁶ Cited by Kimberly Bracken Long, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, 168.

⁷ See David J. Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/10/pentecost-21-c-gratitude-and-grace/>.

joy: “Sometimes, when I crawl into bed,” she writes, “I laugh out loud because I'm so happy to have such a soft, cozy, peaceful, safe place to rest for the night. Doesn't get much better than that, does it?! [heart emoji, praying hands, zzz, stars, moon, heart emoji].” In spite of its simplicity, this post inspires me to more faithfully recognize the many reasons I have to be thankful. It makes me more aware of God’s fundamental goodness, and the offering of gratitude I ought to make more earnestly and more often.

So, if you’d like to join me, sing and pray and make your offering. Then, in a few moments, come to the Lord’s Table and kneel in his presence. Take note of the bread and wine – the body and blood of Christ, God’s mercy given and poured out for you – and give thanks for these and the many other blessings you enjoy, the ones you regularly notice and the ones you take for granted. And, **let your prayer of gratitude at this meal become a pattern in your life, overflowing from you in word and deed to those around you, for the sake of the One to whom we all owe our thanks and praise.**