

Thanksgiving: November 25/26, 2009

The Grace of Gratitude

Luke 17:11-19

By the President of the United States of America, Friday, November 20, 2009: *What began as a harvest celebration between European settlers and indigenous communities nearly four centuries ago has become our cherished tradition of Thanksgiving. Today, we recall President George Washington, who proclaimed our first national day of public thanksgiving to be observed "by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favors of Almighty God." Also President Abraham Lincoln, who established our annual Thanksgiving Day to help mend a fractured Nation in the midst of civil war. From our earliest days of independence, and in times of tragedy and triumph, Americans have come together to celebrate Thanksgiving Day, a unique national tradition.*

Good words. Appropriate words. Did you know, Biblical words?

- of Moses: When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. (Deut. 8:10)
- of the Psalmist: Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. (Psa 100:4)
- of St. Paul: Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thess. 5:18)

We, above all people, should be thankful. We not only have been given great material blessings. We know the Giver of those blessings. And we know that His greater blessings are not material at all. They are the cross and empty tomb. They are the Word and the Sacraments. They are light and life, which to all he brings. God's Gift is Jesus, who is the light of the world. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

With so much to be thankful for, why is ingratitude so pervasive? It has been said that ingratitude is the most common sin. I don't think we would argue the point. What is ingratitude? In a word, it is amnesia. Forgetfulness. Ingratitude forgets all the kindnesses received, all the blessings given. In its place ingratitude leaves the bitter pill of complaint. There is no shortage of things to complain about—the weather, the economy, gasoline prices, problems at work and problems of no work, family problems, ill health, even such mundane things as traffic, inconsiderate neighbors who won't rake their leaves, and long lines at the supermarket. Ingratitude is rooted in a deep sense of entitlement, which is the cancer of our age. My boss owes me. My parents owe me. The government owes me. *God owes me.* We think we're owed a comfortable, easy life, especially because we're good people. If things don't go the way we think they should, we find a way to get mad and stay mad. After all, *somebody* owes me!

Did the ten lepers feel the same way on that day so long ago? If they did, no one was listening. They were lepers after all, and by Mosaic law required to remain outside town. The Mosaic law was particularly graphic in how to treat leprosy. The leper "must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, live alone, outside the camp, cover the lower part of his face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!'" (Lev. 13:45-46). *And you think you have problems?* "Leprosy was nothing short of living death, a dissolution of the whole body, so that one limb after another actually decayed and fell away" (Trench). These ten had more than ingratitude to contend with. They struggled simply to exist. Such desperation removed all pretense, even the distinction between Jew and Samaritan. They had no job, no home, no family, no hope. *I'm blushing that I complained about my neighbor's leaves...*

Even a leper has ways of finding out the news. And the news was that the Galilean teacher—some called him a miracle worker—was passing through town. With everything to gain and nothing to lose, they press the limits of their isolation and cry out, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" Was it the cry of faith? It was the cry of desperation. When there is no other recourse, when every other alternative has

been exhausted, when you are at the end of your rope. *Have you ever been there? Then you know what the lepers knew. And perhaps have prayed the prayer they cried, "Jesus, Master, have pity on me!"* Don't let this moment pass you unaware. It is exactly at this moment—when we abandon all confidence in our resources and place all hope in God's mercy—it is exactly at this moment that we are prepared to hear Jesus' voice and heed Jesus' word.

It is a plain word. A simple word. *Go, show yourselves to the priests.* It was also a meaningful word. Such presentation was the Mosaic requirement for restoration when there was healing. There must have been the spark of faith, at least sufficient to believe that Jesus could heal them. For they transgress their bonds of isolation, make their way into the village, and as they go healing courses through their bodies. Sores shrink and then disappear. Decayed skin is made new again. Deformed fingers uncurl and palsied limbs are strengthened. Their eyes grow wider and wider as they see the transformation take place. *Can it be true? Touch my hands and feet. We are healed!* From the priest they rush away to rejoin family and friends in the land of the living. It is a remarkable miracle and a powerful sign that one greater than Moses was in their midst.

The Grace of Gratitude. Gratitude is a spiritual grace because it is born of faith. Faith which recognizes that God owes me nothing yet gives me everything. Faith which sees Jesus' miracles all around me in the gift of a child, the health in my body, the love of my family. Faith which kneels before the cross and rises before the empty tomb, knowing that genuine thanksgiving stems from the forgiveness of my sins and a restored relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ my Lord. Without faith we receive God's blessings and demand more. With faith we behold such blessings and exclaim with Thomas, "My Lord and my God!" Nine lepers scurry on their way, happy that they got what they wanted, seeing no further benefit in this itinerant miracle worker. The moment passes and the seed of faith falls on hard ground. Unbelief astounds the Son of God who keenly knows that we perish and who offers us rescue. *Where are the nine? Could they not return and give praise to God?*

But not all lack gratitude. There is one. A Samaritan no less. A foreigner. He, too, is healed. But for him a greater miracle happens. He is given *the grace of gratitude.* "My Lord and my God!" He rushes back, throws himself at Jesus' feet, and praises God that such mercy has come to the least and the last, to even one such as him. Know this. All heaven watched with rapture at this exchange. For all heaven rejoices when one sinner repents. *Rise and go, your faith has made you well.* The decay of sin is removed. His crippled spirit is healed. He is given the miracle of a new life and an inheritance imperishable. And gratitude pours forth from his lips. *Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits. He forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases. He redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion. He satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. Praise the Lord, O my soul, all my inmost being, praise his holy name.*

By order of the Lord God of heaven, let there be a feast. In our homes, as we set aside our cares for the moment and enjoy turkey and stuffing, family and friends. In our churches, as we cast our sins at the foot of the cross and feast on the bread of heaven and the rich wine of our salvation. And in heaven, where the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines, where he will wipe away the tears from all faces and swallow up death forever. Then the people of God will say: "Surely this is our God; we trusted in him and he saved us." We pray:

God, we thank you for this food.
For rest and home and all things good.
For wind and rain and sun above.
But most of all for those we love. Amen!