

Luke 17:11-19

Half-way between Halloween and Christmas comes Thanksgiving Day. Perhaps it's a good place to put this Holiday. It reminds us that life is not just about getting candy and presents—it's about being thankful. And so, on the fourth Thursday of each November, after our Halloween bags have disappeared and before gifts appear beneath the tree, we take time out to display an attitude of thankfulness: we pig out on turkey and pumpkin pie, and then we relax in front of the television and watch a football game. But we dare not display such thankfulness for too long, because very early the next morning (4 a.m. for some stores) we grab our VISA cards and begin our quest for Christmas presents.

How is it that Thanksgiving Day has become a day to honor our bellies and reward our bodies with relaxation? Whatever happened to the ideal of fasting and sacrificing so that the less fortunate can share in our blessings? There are those who spend the Holiday working in soup kitchens. Even we put our money in the offering plate on this night to feed the hungry and clothe the poor. But we all know that the focus of Thanksgiving Day for us is feasting and fellowship. We may spend a little time recounting our blessings, as we do with Luther's explanation to the First Article of the Creed, but the majority of our time we spend grabbing the blessings God gives us and enjoying them to the very fullest.

And I think it has always been this way, even before Thanksgiving Day made its way onto the calendar. In our text, ten lepers eagerly took the gift of healing that Jesus gave them. One of them made his way back to the "soup kitchen" to say "Thanks." The other nine took off to find a couch and a piece of pie. All ten were healed. All ten had a new life ahead of them thanks to Jesus. Why did the Samaritan return? Did he have better manners than the other nine? Did his mother take more time teaching him to say "please" and "thank you" when he was a child?

Whatever good manners he was taught have nothing to do with his actions. The plain simple fact is that this Samaritan leper was greedy. He wanted more. He came back for "seconds." All ten believed Jesus had the power to heal them of their leprosy. This one believed Jesus could save him from his sins. And so he returned. Thankfulness was on his lips, but desire was in his heart. He wanted Jesus to bless him with everything He had to give. And He did. "Go your way," Jesus told him, "Your faith has saved you."

This story is one of many in the Bible which teaches us that Christian thankfulness is not so much about what we say in thanks to God, but in what He gives in mercy to us. Jesus blesses you, not because you are thankful, but because He is merciful. And He wants you to keep coming back to Him, not because He covets your thanks, but because He always has more to give you. And we're not talking here about turkey, dressing, and pie. These, too, are blessings from God; but they, like all other temporal gifts, will fade away. Here in His Word and Sacraments He has eternal gifts for you—forgiveness, life, and salvation. And every time you come to His House He keeps refilling your plate. He never grows weary of forgiving your sins. He never tires of giving you His sacred body. His cup for you never runs dry. God wants you to be a "greedy" Christian, not with regard to your belly, but with regard to your heart and soul. Like the Samaritan leper, He wants you to keep coming back for seconds.

Sadly we, too often, think we've had enough of God's grace. We think that one trip to His Holy Supper every now and then will do just fine. We don't hunger for the eternal blessings in His Word as the Samaritan leper did. Like the other nine we're content with the earthly blessings He gives us. But we forget that God gives bread to both the righteous and the unrighteous—but He has better gifts in store for you.

You're not going to be given a fresh turkey this evening. We're not handing out coupons to your favorite grocery store. But we are giving you the words of eternal life. Jesus is here to give Himself to you. And He doesn't first check to see how thankful you are in your heart. He gives Himself to you because your heart, like mine, is full of sin. He forgives you because you and I have lived thinking that we're doing fine without Him. He gives you His body and blood to cleanse the filthy desires of our hearts and bellies. And He does all this because He has you in His heart.

He went to the cross, friend, because He was thankful for you. He had no greater desire than to take your place in hell. He refused the cup of sour wine so that He can give you the cup of His blood shed for you. Jesus is here in His "soup kitchen" tonight because we poor beggars need the Bread of Life that only He can give. He is here to serve you. He puts on His bloody apron and fills your plate with good things. He died on the cross for you so that here in Word and Sacrament He can give you forgiveness and life. And He does forgive you, friend. No matter how thankful or thankless you are, you are forgiven of all your sins. Heaven is yours in Christ Jesus.

Rejoice! On this Thanksgiving Eve, rejoice! You are the Samaritan leper and you have returned to Jesus. "Go your way," He tells you, "Your faith has saved you." Amen.