

Weekly Devotion November 23, 2020 Thanksgiving Week
Matthew Woods, Grace Lutheran Church

“Giving Thanks in All Circumstances”

Happy Thanksgiving to you. Thanksgiving remains one of my favorite holidays. I love the simplicity of Thanksgiving: get together with family and friends, eat yourself into a turkey coma, watch the Detroit Lions snatch defeat out of the hands of victory, and enjoy the people you're with. It's wonderfully basic. No tree. No presents to buy. No eggs to hide. No costume to wear. No valentine's flowers to bring. Thanksgiving is wonderfully without all the obligations that are associate with most other times of the year. And it focuses not on what we do not have but on what we do.

Today we turn to a passage from Luke 17:11-19 which talks about a thankful Samaritan. It seems that there are “Good Samaritans” and thankful ones.

“While He was on the way to Jerusalem, He was passing between Samaria and Galilee. As He entered a village, ten leprous men who stood at a distance met Him; and they raised their voices, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” When He saw them, He said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they were going, they were cleansed. Now one of them, when he saw that he had been healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice, and he fell on his face at His feet, giving thanks to Him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered and said, “Were there not ten cleansed? But the nine—where are they? Was no one found who returned to give glory to God, except this foreigner?” And He said to him, “Stand up and go; your faith has made you well.” (KJV) Luke 17:11-19

Leperousy had brought together Samaritans and Galileans but as soon as they were healed they went their different ways. What was different about this tenth victim of leprosy? Its subtle but the difference is in two words “cleansed” *katharizo* (*no longer having the disease of leprosy*) and “healed” *sesoken*, (*meaning to be “whole” or “well”*). It carries overtones of “to rescue, save, or heal.” In other words, faith in Jesus resulted from the healing. The other nine ran to the priest so they could return to their families as soon as possible. Who could blame them? To be indefinitely separated or socially distant from the people we love has proven itself to be detrimental to our families during Covid. Isolation has bred loneliness and fear. Reports from families of our shut-ins report a high level of depression and sadness. These lepers probably felt this way in their isolation. Short of a miracle, none of them probably expected to hug their spouse or children ever again. But before going back to his family one man who comes to faith in Jesus makes it a point to thank the Lord before going home to his family. That's the spirit of thanksgiving.

Nothing brings focused to what we have until it is gone. For this reason, I routinely encourage Confirmands to give thanks for their eyes, ears, and senses, good backs, strong legs and flexibility, hand strong enough to unscrew the Jiffy Peanut Butter, strong lungs, a healthy heart, a digestive system that works like it should.

My first, hospital call was to a 17 year old girl who had leukemia. She was laying in a bed powerless to move, bonnet on her bald head, with her mom on the side of the bed journaling for her because she was too weak to write that day. “Pastor”, she said, “I look forward to being able to take a shower and brush my teeth.” I thought, “I do that every day without a single thought but this young lady would love to have that simple little thing.” She gives thanks for it today. Thankfully she went on to marry and have kids of her own, a miracle.

This week I turn 51 already. Seems like I just celebrated my 50th. Half of a century of life I have lived. Some say, “It’s just another day.” Others say, “it’s a threshold of sorts.” AARP magically finds you and stalks you with invitations to the old-people’s club. Jokes are made about going over the hill. Doctors boldly go where no one has been before introducing a torture chamber of ways that would get normal people in other professions serious jail time. And they use strange tools that would otherwise be outlawed by the Geneva convention. Others who have crossed the threshold long ago speak of the golden years with a sinister smile as though some ominous thing is about to strike. They say that I get to look forward to new prescriptions and wondrous side-effects; aches and pains, along with specialists whose names I will not be able to pronounce. Many are the woes of aging and the humiliation that widdles away the dignity and strength of far too many. Time after fifty they say goes so much faster. Someone once said, “Getting older is like a roll of toilet paper—the closer one gets to the end the faster it goes.” The floor gets farther down, ladders get taller, and everything gets heavier from this point. It is a time of forgetting things and life getting faster than one can keep up.

On the day that I turned 50 however I found myself mostly grateful. Glad that my youth didn’t get me killed or overrun by the stupidity of my youth. I am grateful for just how far I have come and how rich my life feels. I am Grateful for Tricia and I am grateful for my boys becoming fine, hardworking, young men.

I am grateful that this year I now have two wonderful daughter-in-laws that I am proud to have as part of our family. I am grateful for this congregation, the people I work with, and the many I have known over the years—many of whom I miss terribly. The biggest lesson at fifty was that I am learning better to savor the moment whatever that moment may be. I encourage you to do the same.

Enjoy what you have. When you start listing your blessings you will find you already have a lot. This year even little things that were once taken for granted are worth noticing; like toilet paper. For the Leper that thanked Jesus, I will bet that he took stock of every detail of his life while he was separated with Leprosy. And if I was in his shoes, I would thank the good Lord for my life, and would make it a point never to waste another minute complaining about what I didn’t have.

That’s the beauty of thanksgiving. Giving thanks is the greatest antidote to complaining, envy, and discontentment. In Philippians 4:11-13 Paul writes, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³ I can do all this through him who gives me strength.” What Paul realizes is how much he has in any and every situation, well fed or hungry, in plenty or in want. He’s been healed in Jesus—made whole and therefore no longer limited by things he doesn’t have. He has what is needed most. And so do we.

So, let us say Happy Thanksgiving this week. Let us give thanks for all that good God has given in Jesus. Let us give thanks for the family we love, the car that gets us places, the home that keeps us warm, the table that keeps us fed, and for the humble basics of our lives that are often so subtle they may get overlooked. Hug your kids and take a breath. Enjoy and give thanks.

Pastor Matthew Woods
John 3:30