

Sermon: A Thanksgiving Faith

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, October 9, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Happy Thanksgiving. On this particular Sunday, as the community of faith across Canada celebrate Thanksgiving, I would like to begin my reflection by quoting psalmist in Psalm 118 and 136, "*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.*"

It is proper for us to give thanks to the Lord, for the Lord God is our creator, our redeemer, and our sustainer. God created us out of chaos, God set order in the Cosmos and gave us the Law to govern our lives. When the Law proved to be inadequate in its original purpose, God sent His only begotten Son Jesus Christ to be our redemption, our salvation. In time, God sent the Holy Spirit to gather the Church, and by the Spirit of God is our faith sustained, strengthen, made alive into an active and living faith. So it is right and proper that we should give thanks to God, for God is good; and the love of God endures forever.

Yet, would it surprise you to learn that Thanksgiving as a holiday is actually not a religious holiday but a secular one? It is commonly celebrated this side of the Atlantic, as a national holiday in Canada and in the United States. To my understanding, the tradition of Thanksgiving really started with the Puritans as a fall harvest festival, giving thanks to God for their safe journey and for settling into a plentiful land. Thus Thanksgiving as a holiday finds its origin not in the Scripture, but in the tradition of a particular community of faith. Which begs the question, and it is a thought provoking one that I am posing to you: Is giving thanks to God a necessary part of faith?

Two passages in our Scripture readings today should help guide our thinking. The passage in Deuteronomy 26 is a reminder from Moses to the Israelites, not to forget their origin. "*A wandering Aramean was their ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous*" (Deut. 26:5). Through the subsequent remembering of the salvation history of Israel, the people of God were to recall their humble beginning, to remember how God had guided them, heard their cry for help, delivered

them from slavery, and had brought them in a good land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

The people of God were to bring the first of all fruit of the ground, and lay it before God as offerings, acknowledging God's continuing blessings—that all things belong to the Lord God, and it is right to give thanks by bringing before God the best, the first of all the fruit of the ground. Thus giving thanks to God becomes an integral part of the communal worship.

If the passage of Deuteronomy sets the archetype, the ideal of giving thanks to God, the passage in Luke 17 reveals its reality. On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus was going through the region of Samaria. Now it should be noted that travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem, there was a more direct mountain ridge road that essentially bypasses the region of Samaria altogether. So we should really see this particular itinerary as Jesus making a purposeful detour.

So as Jesus entered a village, ten lepers approached him, keeping their distance. Leprosy in the Scripture covers a wide multitude of skin diseases, some curable, most not. The disease itself is generally known as contagious, the carriers viewed as sinful. Those who contracted leprosy were often cast out from community as they were deemed to be both physically and spiritually unclean. They lived in separated colonies, left to fend for themselves. Some (that is very few) did recover, but most would eventually perish in misery and abject poverty.

So a colony of ten lepers were right on the tail of Jesus, and calling out to him, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Somehow, they got wind of a miracle healer passing through town, and they grabbed on to a faint hope. They thought perhaps, just perhaps, this Teacher, this Master, would be make a difference, would somehow be merciful—not just sparing a few coins but would somehow stitch them back whole.

Notice when Jesus saw them, his first and only words to them were, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." Now that is somewhat puzzling because at this point Jesus had yet to heal this group of ten lepers. Showing oneself to the priest is in keeping with Leviticus 13—the Law concerning Leprosy, whereby a somehow healed leper could demonstrated to a priest of their recovered health, thus able to rejoin the wider community.

Here's the kicker, the Scripture informs us in verse 14, "And as they went, they were made clean." This group of ten lepers had obeyed Jesus without question, they went as they were told, even before being cured of

their disease. And as they were on their way, they were somehow made clean. From my point of view, that is faith. That is the classic definition of faith, of believing without seeing, of stepping out of the boat, of trusting completely in the Lord. And by that faith, and I do believe it was a gift of God, they were cured of leprosy.

But the story didn't end there. One of them, a Samaritan, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus's feet and thanked him. Before we get too judgemental of the other nine, we should acknowledge that they obeyed Jesus, they followed the Law to be checked by a priest, and they rejoined the covenantal community with much joy and undoubtedly thanksgiving in their heart. Yet this one Samaritan was different, he returned to praise God by giving thanks to Jesus.

The word 'give thanks' in Greek is *Eucharistia*. It is a construct of two words 'Eu' and 'Charist'. 'Eu' is a preposition, meaning 'in the midst'. 'Charist' in Greek means simply a gift, a grace. *Eucharistia* is the response in the midst of grace to the gift-giver. It is a relational term, saying 'I care more for the gift-giver than the actual gift'. For those with keen observation, the word we as the community of faith use to describe the Holy Communion is Eucharist, giving thanks for the body of Christ broken for us, and the blood of Christ shed for us.

So what we can conclude is that all ten lepers had faith, yet only one returned to practice *Eucharistia*. Only one remembered and returned to praise God, by giving thanks to Jesus Christ, his master, his Lord. Only one demonstrated true care more for the gift-giver than the gift. Only one.

For doing so, Jesus said to him in verse 19, "*Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.*" The word 'being made well' in Greek is *Soza*. It describes more than a physical healing; it encompasses a holistic salvation of the body, the mind and the soul. In this case, *Soza* is the direct result of *Eucharistia*—the only one Samaritan former leper got to experience the full richness of God's salvation, at that time.

Here is the good news of the Gospel: **the giver keeps on giving regardless of thanksgiving**. Jesus went on ahead from that town in Samaria, he continued on towards Jerusalem. He would accomplish what God had set out to accomplish, on the cross, regardless of gratefulness or ungratefulness, from friends or foes.

Knowing who Jesus is and what he had done, we could only be in awe, and prostrate ourselves at his feet, saying “Give thanks to the Lord, for God is Good, and the love of God endures forever.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**