

## **Luke 17:11-19**

Thanksgiving Eve + November 21, 2018  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho  
Pastor Tim Pauls  
The Liturgy of the Lepers

The Word of the Lord from Luke 17:12-13: "And as [Jesus] entered a village, He was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here you are on the eve of another Thanksgiving; and, as usual, the gospel lesson appointed is the story of the ten lepers. It's become as much a part of Thanksgiving as turkey and stuffing! So I begin with this question: Are you like the ten lepers?

My answer is, I sure hope so.

I should clarify, of course, because nine out of ten are pretty disappointing by the end. To be fair, then, I should ask this: do you come to the service tonight as the ten lepers came to Jesus?

Remember their condition. They've been diagnosed with a horrible, and horribly contagious disease. They've been quarantined so that it doesn't spread: they've left – or perhaps been removed from – house and home and family. They're gathered to die lonely together. As you'll no doubt recall from last year's Thanksgiving sermon(!), they have a sermon to preach to anyone who gets anywhere close to them: it's a classic, commanded by God way back in Leviticus 13:45, short, shouted and to the point. If anyone draws near, they are to cry out, "Unclean! Unclean!" The law says that they can't draw near to others because of their disease. And because the disease makes them obviously less than perfectly healthy, they are unholy and can't draw anywhere near to God, either.

These men are isolated, dying, with no hope and nothing to give. That's what sin does to everybody. It's just that these lepers know it better than you do.

Jesus comes along, and the lepers shout, but it's a new sermon. It's not "Unclean!," but "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." It's a far better sermon for all sorts of reasons.

First off, it tells us that the Word has spread. It teaches us about evangelism. Long before mass media, even these ten quarantined lepers have heard about Jesus; and hearing this good news, they believe. Believing, they call out to Jesus because they trust that He can heal them.

Second, they've got the relationship right. They call Him the master, which means they identify as His would-be servants. That's a stretch, though: who needs a servant who is fatally contagious and dying? They can't even draw near enough to show Him proper respect by falling at His feet. Imagine the spectacle: if ten unkempt, diseased men start yelling at you from a distance, I daresay that you'd probably use that distance to increase the distance that much more. Not Jesus, as we'll soon see.

Third, trusting in Jesus and knowing they are dying men who have nothing to give, they cry out for mercy. They don't try to barter. They don't make promises about the future. They simply say what they believe – and, happily, what is true: they need help, Jesus has the help that they need, and Jesus loves helping people.

All of that is in their cry, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."

Again, this is all true – not because they believe it, but because this is what God promises about the Christ through all of Scripture. As Luther would say, when these lepers cry out to Jesus, they are taking His own promises and they are rubbing them in His ears. That's one more reason why the lepers' sermon is better than the old one from Leviticus. The first was a sermon of law, that sin and leprosy kill. This new one well on its way to the gospel, as they rejoice in the Lord who comes to deliver!

Jesus loves to keep His promises, and so He does! "Go, show yourselves to the priests," He says; and the only reason they would go to the priests would be to prove that they are clean, healed and ready to return to life.

We pause here to repeat the question: are you like the ten lepers? Do you come to this service as they came to Jesus?

This service is designed for lepers, after all: it's for sinners, for those who suffer the sort of leprosy that rots the soul. Like those ten lepers, you're likely here because you've heard about Jesus. You've heard that He is here in His means of grace, and that He's the sort of miracle-worker who cleanses souls. He delights to cleanse souls! He's died and risen again to make it so.

Like the ten, you know the relationship. You said it out loud before, but you took a lot longer than a leper would. You said, "I, a poor miserable sinner, confess unto You all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended You, and justly deserve Your temporal and eternal punishment." In other words, "Unclean! Unclean!"

In case you haven't noticed, that's not a strong bargaining position; but it is the truth. And knowing the truth about the Lord, you go on. You start rubbing His promises in His ears, saying, "But I am heartily sorry for them, and sincerely repent of them, and I pray You of Your boundless *mercy*..." And why do you call upon the Lord for mercy? Not because of you – you've just made that abundantly clear! No, you ask for mercy "for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of [His] beloved Son, Jesus Christ."

Having confessed your sins and your trust in Christ, you hear what He has to say to you. He says, "I forgive you all of your sins." Note that He doesn't say, "Go" to you quite yet. He says, "Stick around, because I've got a lot more grace and faith to give in My Word and Supper tonight before you depart in peace."

And how do you respond to this? You sing the song of the lepers: "Lord, have mercy upon us! Christ, have mercy upon us! Lord have mercy upon us!" It's not exclusive to the lepers: all sorts of people in the gospels cry out to Jesus for mercy. They all have this in common: they are afflicted and dying, they have nothing to offer, but they believe Jesus will save them because He is merciful.

You sing the Kyrie, "Lord, have mercy;" and perhaps we might even say that this is especially the song of the one leper, the Samaritan. The other nine have seized on the healing and run away without even a word of thanks. The Samaritan, though, comes back. He falls at Jesus' feet and gives Him thanks. He gives praise to God. And because he remains with Jesus, he is there to receive more of a blessing – healing of soul to go along with the healing of body, for Jesus says, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."

A few thoughts, then, on the ten lepers on the eve of this Thanksgiving holiday.

First off, let's show the absurdity of merely going through the motions at church. The Confession and Absolution, as well as the Kyrie, are not magical incantations. They are a statement of what is true, both your condition and God's mercy. You will always face the temptation of daydreaming through the

words without paying attention to them, to think that they're just a needless repetition. Worse, you'll be tempted to think that they are a magic spell that you okay with God whether you're repentant or not.

We'll address the second one first, because it's so easy to demonstrate how ridiculous it is to think that the absolution makes you and your sin okay with God even if you're not repentant. That would be akin to one of the lepers saying, "I want Jesus to declare me clean, but I still want keep the disease so that my limbs rot off one by one and I die a horrible death." No one is that foolish: you're either healed or you're still a leper. There's no such thing as healthy leprosy. Yet too many treat forgiveness that way, believing that forgiveness somehow sanctifies their sin. That sin is rotting your soul and killing you; and if you want to keep a rotting, dying soul, the Lord won't force you to be healed; and so your impenitence will kill you. Beware the temptation that absolution somehow permits you to keep on willfully sinning.

Then there's always that temptation to daydream through the confession and the Kyrie. Do you suppose that any of the ten lepers were daydreaming as they cried to Jesus for mercy? I am betting the answer is no. Why? Because they knew their need, they knew Jesus was there and they knew it was a matter of life and death.

Would you say anything different about the forgiveness of sins? So why would you ever be tempted to mouth the words while you think about something else as if this is an empty ritual and no big thing? I would have to think the answer can only be that you don't appreciate the gift as much as you should, which is what makes this such an appropriate text for Thanksgiving.

See, the more you think you deserve something, the less you will be thankful for it. If you take your sin lightly – which is as "wise" as taking leprosy lightly, then you will take forgiveness lightly too because you think that God ought to favor you just because you're you. On the other hand, if you take seriously the depth of your sin and how undeserved is God's mercy, you're going to appreciate deliverance from death and hell. If you examine yourself for a bit before the service begins, you're going to be champing at the bit for the next absolution and Supper.

When it starts with forgiveness, that train of ingratitude is only leaving the station. It spills out to the rest of life. If you take God's mercy lightly, then you'll start to think that all that you have is what you deserve. Part of the Christian faith is that God gives us all things for this body and life, and He does so purely out of fatherly divine goodness and mercy – and it is purely so because, apart from Christ, we're the lepers. If you think that what you have is deserved, then you won't be very thankful; instead, you'll be feeding that covetous nature that wants to have more. And, sadly, rather than be thankful for all the gifts God gives – right down to a heartbeat and daily breath, you won't know what you've got from Him until it's gone.

On the eve of this national holiday called Thanksgiving, then, it's a good time for repentance, yes? It is a good time to examine yourself, confess your sins and particularly your ingratitude that arises from a high opinion of yourself. Why would we talk about repentance, even at Thanksgiving, when it sounds like such a "downer"? Because the road to true thanksgiving runs through repentance and the joy of God's undeserved mercy.

Make no mistake. It is a good time to give thanks to God and marvel at His creative, abundant generosity with which He has blessed your life. You know Luther's explanation to the First Article of the Creed: He gives you body and soul, eyes, ears and all your members; your reason and all your senses, and still preserves them. He also gives you clothing and shoes (I'm betting more than one outfit too), food and drink (no one here looks like they've been in a famine), house and home (you're not living on the street, are you?), family, fields, cattle and all your goods. Why? Out of fatherly divine goodness and mercy – the same mercy that sent those lepers running home with joy!

This is a good time to give thanks for all those things. It is also a good time to marvel most of all at His gift of forgiveness. It was bought at a price – the blood of His only-begotten Son. It cures you not just from some comparatively “little” ailment like a horrible, terminal, flesh-eating disease. It cures you of a rotted soul, always under attack by sin, death and devil. It promises the resurrection to eternal life – for mind and body, soul and spirit all.

Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, and His mercy endures forever. By the grace of God, by the work of the Holy Spirit, be the ten lepers who cry out to the Lord for mercy, confident that He has grace for those who have nothing to give. By the grace of God, by the work of the Holy Spirit, be the one who returns with thanks – and who continues to receive more gifts of grace and faith from God. For to such – to you – this night, forgiving all your sins and presumption and ingratitude, the Lord Jesus Christ says to you, His repentant child, “Go your way: your faith has made well.”

Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen