

**Dave Johnson**

**Sermon: “The Thankful Samaritan” (Luke 17:11-19)**

**Thanksgiving Day, 11/26/09**

Thanksgiving is one of my favorite holidays. From my childhood until today I have never grown tired of the smells of turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, and pumpkin pie; never grown tired of sharing this special day with family and friends. And there’s the added bonus of watching a little football, a little of the Detroit Lions game while awaiting the feast, and after the dishes are done and put away a little of the Dallas Cowboys game. I love all the traditions of Thanksgiving.

What a privilege it is to live in the United States and have a holiday dedicated to giving thanks for all the blessings we enjoy. All of us have so much for which to be thankful. Yesterday I was at Westminster-Canterbury for our monthly service. I always enjoy going over there to spend time with people older and wiser than me. During the service we went around and had each person say one or two things for which they are thankful. One was thankful for the opportunity to worship, another for the privilege of living at Westminster-Canterbury. One was thankful that her son, who had been laid off, had found another job. One whose wife died this year was thankful that his three children were in town, and one of his daughters was thankful for her mom’s life. One said that every morning she simply thanks God for another day. All of them have lived long lives and experienced many ups and downs, and it was quite moving to listen to each one share things for which they are thankful.

We have so much for which to be thankful—the freedom to worship here this morning, clothes, food, places to live, people to love, people who love us, the four seasons, music, books, sports, every heartbeat, every breath—and all of these things are gifts from God. As we see in the Letter of James, “Every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (1:17). In today’s Old Testament reading from I Chronicles listen to what David prayed after all the supplies for the building of the temple were gathered: “All things come of Thee (O Lord) and of Thine own have we given Thee” (29:14, KJV). On Thanksgiving we remember that all the blessings we enjoy indeed come from God, and we humble ourselves and say, “Thank You.”

And that is exactly what we see in today’s gospel reading from Luke 17. Jesus is on the road between Samaria and Galilee and encounters a group of ten lepers. These lepers were literally outsiders, who lived outside of town according to the following Old Testament law found in Leviticus—“He (the leper) shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp” (13:46). The only people lepers could be with were other lepers. They were forbidden to attend temple worship, forbidden to enter someone’s home, forbidden to touch another human being. Lepers were in a desperate, desperate situation.

Ten desperate lepers see Jesus approaching on the road, and keeping their distance, they call out to him, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” Jesus does not waste any time. He immediately replies, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” In the Old Testament if lepers were cured they would have to go and show themselves to a priest, who acted as a sort of health inspector. If the priest pronounced them clean, they were free to reenter society. Interestingly enough, instead of telling the lepers, “You are cured,” Jesus commanded them to go show themselves to the priest—in other words, to do what they would do if they were cured. Luke tells us, “as they went, they were made clean.”

But that’s not the end of the story. One of the ten, “when he saw that he was healed,” returned to Jesus—and listen to what he did: “He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him.” The healed man humbled himself before Jesus and said, “Thank you.” Moreover, Luke emphasizes that the one who returned to thank Jesus was a Samaritan. Samaritans were hated by the Jews, and were absolutely avoided by them. But Jesus did not hate Samaritans, and he did not avoid them. In fact, in Jesus’ ministry he frequently interacted with Samaritans, as he did with the woman at the well in John 4, and spoke well of them, as he did in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. And in today’s passage Jesus commends the Samaritan for his faith: “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

When it comes to us, God loves all of us, whether or not the world may consider us outsiders like the lepers and the Samaritans. In fact, God has a special place in his heart for those whom the world may consider outsiders. Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). Jesus came to save sinners (I Timothy 1:15). He did that in his death on the cross to atone for the sins of the world and in his resurrection to give us the hope of eternal life with him. All of this is a gift, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians: “by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (2:8).

And in response to this gift of salvation and eternal life in Jesus Christ we are to follow the example of the Samaritan and return to Jesus, humble ourselves before him, and say, “Thank you.”

I mentioned this in a sermon several months ago, but there is a powerful example what it looks like to return to someone in order to say, “Thank you” in Doug Stanton’s powerful book, *In Harm’s Way*. This book is about the August 1945 sinking of the USS Indianapolis and how those who survived endured dehydration, shark attacks, and other horrors. (You may remember the actor Robert Shaw’s character describing this in the movie, *Jaws*). Thirteen years later one of the survivors, named Felton Outland, decided he needed to thank in person a fellow sailor named John McCoy who had helped him stay alive. He drove from his home in Sunbury, North Carolina all the way to Booneville, Missouri “to thank McCoy for his life.” Outland knocked on the door of McCoy’s house. After opening the door, “The two men stared at each other. Then they embraced and began weeping on the porch... They ended up talking for two days, a flood of

memories pouring forth between them” (p. 272). Outland knew that the only reason he was alive was because McCoy had saved him, and he returned to him so he could say, “Thank you.”

We do not have to drive from North Carolina to Missouri to say, “Thank you” to God for all he has given us in Jesus Christ. We can do that anytime, as we saw in today’s lesson from Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians, we are to “give thanks in all circumstances” (5:18), and as we read in Psalm 95 we are to “come before His presence with thanksgiving” (95:2). Moreover, we have the opportunity here at Christ Church to do that not just once a year on Thanksgiving Day, but every week as we celebrate Holy Eucharist.

The word, “Eucharist,” as you may know, comes from the Greek verb, *eucharizo*, which means “to give thanks.” The first half of the Holy Communion part of our Holy Eucharist service is called “The Great Thanksgiving.” In this service we acknowledge upfront that “we should at all times, and in all places, give thanks unto” God (BCP 333). We render to God “most hearty thanks for the innumerable benefits procured unto us” by the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ (BCP 335). In response to the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross to atone for the sins of the world, including yours and mine, we offer in response a “sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving” (BCP 335). And in the post-communion prayer we begin, “Almighty and everliving God, we most heartily thank thee for that thou dost feed us, in these holy mysteries, with the spiritual food of the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son our Savior Jesus Christ” (BCP 339). Finally, at the dismissal the service concludes with “Thanks be to God.”

And God is blessed when we thank Him. In your own life doesn’t it feel good to receive a thank-you note or to have someone simply say, “Thank you”? For the last nine years I’ve coached soccer in the fall and spring for one or more of our kids. Years ago at the end of the season one of the players, named Ashley, who came from an extremely troubled family situation, gave me a hug and said, “Thanks, coach.” I had to fight back the tears. When people say, “Thank you,” it blesses us.

So on this Thanksgiving Day we can be encouraged because all the blessings we enjoy, especially salvation and hope of eternal life in Jesus Christ, are given us by God. God loves all of us, whether or not like the lepers and Samaritans in Jesus’ day we may be considered outsiders. All of us, like our brothers and sisters at Westminster-Canterbury, have so much for which to be thankful. Today as we celebrate Holy Communion we have the opportunity to follow the example of the healed Samaritan and kneel before Jesus and say, “Thank you.” And we can be assured that when we say, “Thank you,” to God, He is blessed.

Let us pray...