

Psalm 65  
Luke 17:11-19

24<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
November 19, 2017

### **Now, What Do You Say?**

#### *Introduction to the Psalm*

Our Psalm today expresses thanksgiving for the earth's bounty at the occasion of a fruitful harvest, perhaps coming after a drought. The harvest is seen in the context of God's covenant promises. Singing this song can help worshippers develop a deep spirit of gratitude. Listen to these words from Psalm 65...

#### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

In our Gospel Lesson today we find Jesus on his way to completing his final journey to Jerusalem. Passing along between Samaria and Galilee, he entered a village where he was met by ten lepers. You know the story, but listen again to Luke 17:11-19...

#### *Sermon*

Scottish minister Alexander Whyte was known for his uplifting prayers in the pulpit. He always found something for which to be grateful. But one Sunday morning the weather was so gloomy that a church member thought to himself, "Certainly the preacher won't think of anything for which to thank the Lord on such a wretched day like this." Much to his surprise however, Whyte began by praying, "We thank Thee, O God, that it is not always like this."

Come Thanksgiving it's hard to get away from the passage in Luke where Jesus heals ten lepers, but only one returns to give thanks. It's about like omitting from Christmas Luke 2:1-20, which presents the story of Jesus' birth, with angels and shepherds, Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph, and the baby Jesus "lying in a manger."

Unfortunately, we don't know the name of the man who remembered to express gratitude for his healing. We do know that he was a Samaritan. We know that the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans. But here a common misfortune has broken down racial, religious, and national barriers.

As he entered a certain village, Jesus met ten men. The common misfortune that bound them together was that they all had that dreaded disease of ancient times—leprosy. Today most leprosy cases can be cured with treatment. In the past 20 years, 16 million people worldwide have been cured of leprosy. About 200 cases are reported each year in the United States. There is an American Leprosy Missions center located in Greenville. What a tragedy it is that all too often we require some kind of dire hardship to break down barriers between one another. It is said that when a flood engulfs a place, and the wild animals gather on a small piece of higher ground, you will see standing together, animals which are natural enemies, such as wolves and rabbits. Sadly, too many times we are no better than the wild animals—waiting for tragedy before we stand together.

In the second verse of our Gospel Lesson we read that these ten men “stood afar off.” There was no designated distance at which they were to stand, but we know that it was laid down that when the wind was blowing from the leper toward the healthy person, the leper should stand at least fifty yards away. This practice clearly shows the kind of isolation in which lepers had to live. All ten are alike in their isolation. They're shut off from home, friends, and the consolations of the church.

But they all share the common desire to live. Though their burden is extremely difficult, though they seem miserably doomed, they aren't ready to give up. They want to live a normal life.

Again, all of them see Jesus as someone who hopefully can help them. Reports are that he cared for people as none other cared; that he associated with tax collectors and sinners; that he befriended outcasts. It was even said that he brought purity to unclean lepers. They all share a common hope in Jesus. And when Jesus appears the whole group of ten lift up their voices, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.”

The ten are even alike in their obedience to Jesus. He doesn’t heal them immediately but tells them to go and show themselves to the priests. It was the custom to go to the priest *after* a leper was cured. But these men are told to go to the priest while they still have the loathsome disease. They all follow Jesus’ instructions. “And as they went they were cleansed.”

They are new people with new lives to live. No longer must they exist as outcasts, insulated from others. Now they are free to live a normal, healthy life. But here the likeness of the ten men ends. For two roads emerge and only one man takes the road less traveled. And he is a Samaritan. He is the one who remembered to say, “Thank you.”

We might well ponder why one remembered to give thanks and nine forgot. Was it because of their circumstances? No, for they were alike in their affliction. Had only the Samaritan been cured while the other nine were not, then we might have expected this outcome. But in fact, thanksgiving is rarely due to circumstances. If that were true, then the healthy, rich, and successful would have grateful hearts, while the sick, poor, and heavy laden would be thankless. The truth of the matter is that people in both groups often forget to express gratitude.

In these verses from Luke’s gospel Jesus is trying to teach us the importance of being grateful and expressing thanksgiving. That’s what parents do when their two-year-old child has been helped or given something special by another person. “Now, what do you say?” Thereby

does the child learn to say, “Thank you.” Thereby, does the child learn to see blessings as gifts, not rights.

Recently I read about a man who went to see his mother in a nursing home. While he was visiting there he saw a familiar face. It turned out to be a long-time teacher in a public school. In fact, the teacher had taught his children, now fully grown. And she had a profound impact on his daughter and was forever after that daughter’s favorite teacher. The girl’s abilities in school and her love of learning grew the year she had that teacher. From then on she was a better student.

Well, the man drove home that day thinking about what the teacher, now in the nursing home, had once done for his daughter in the classroom. So that night he decided to thank her. He wrote her a letter, and, to let her know his thanks was genuine and not just a nicety, he was very specific about what the teacher had done for his daughter.

On a later visit to his mother, the man decided to go see the teacher while he was there visiting his mother at the nursing home. He asked for, and found, her room. When he went in, he saw the letter he had written taped to her wall. The teacher did not have much of a life anymore outside that room, but that letter reminded her that she had opened the world to a child. And she was so moved to put the letter where she could easily see it. That’s the power of expressing gratitude.

There’s another “Thanksgiving” story about “The Old Man and the Gulls,” from Paul Harvey’s *The Rest of the Story*:

It is gratitude that prompted an old man to visit an old broken pier on the eastern seacoast of Florida. Every Friday night, until his death in 1973, he would return, walking slowly and slightly stooped with a large bucket of shrimp. The sea gulls would flock to this old man, and he would feed them from his bucket. Many years before, in October, 1942, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker was on a mission in a B-17 to deliver an important message to General Douglas MacArthur in New Guinea. But there was an unexpected detour which would hurl Captain Eddie into the most harrowing adventure of his life.

Somewhere over the South Pacific the Flying Fortress became lost beyond the reach of radio. Fuel ran dangerously low, so the men ditched their plane in the ocean...For nearly a month Captain Eddie and his companions would fight the water, and the weather, and the scorching sun. They spent many sleepless nights recoiling as giant sharks rammed their rafts. The largest raft was nine by five. The biggest shark...ten feet long.

But of all their enemies at sea, one proved most formidable: starvation. Eight days out, their rations were long gone or destroyed by the salt water. It would take a miracle to sustain them. And a miracle occurred. In Captain Eddie's own words, "Cherry," (that was the B-17 pilot, Captain William Cherry), "read the service that afternoon, and we finished with a prayer for deliverance and a hymn of praise. There was some talk, but it tapered off in the oppressive heat. With my hat pulled down over my eyes to keep out some of the glare, I dozed off."

Now this is still Captain Rickenbacker talking..."Something landed on my head. I knew that it was a sea gull. I don't know how I knew, I just knew. Everyone else knew too. No one said a word, but peering out from under my hat brim without moving my head, I could see the expression on their faces. They were staring at that gull. The gull meant food...if I could catch it."

And the rest, as they say, is history. Captain Eddie caught the gull. Its flesh was eaten. Its intestines were used for bait to catch fish. The survivors were sustained and their hopes renewed because a lone sea gull, uncharacteristically hundreds of miles from land, offered itself as a sacrifice. You know that Captain Eddie made it.

And now you also know...that he never forgot. Because every Friday evening, about sunset...on a lonely stretch along the eastern Florida seacoast...you could see an old man walking...white-haired, bushy-eyebrowed, slightly bent. His bucket filled with shrimp to feed the gulls...to remember that one which, on a day long past, gave itself without a struggle...like manna in the wilderness.

And so we join with Jesus in recognizing the healed Samaritan who returned to give thanks. A grateful heart brings blessings to us and to others as well. Let us remember to say "Thank you," to people who help us and give us gifts. And let's remember to say "Thank you," to God for his priceless gift to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. The One who gave himself for us and our salvation.

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