

Dear thankful people of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Ever see or hear of someone whose condition was so severe that they were as good as dead with no hope. That is how people with leprosy were treated, as good as dead. Once diagnosed, there is nothing one could do to heal himself. Separated from their homes, from society, this dreaded disease not only led to inevitable death but took the joy out of living. So you too are as good as dead. Your sin leaves you with nothing else, only separation from your heavenly home and nothing that you can do to escape death.

When Abraham Lincoln delivered his Thanksgiving Proclamation in 1863, the reality of sin was staring the whole country in the face. With the Civil War raging throughout the country, there was death and destruction everywhere. Yet Lincoln professes:

“It is the duty of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power God; to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with the assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon.”

Sin takes the glory of mankind away and replaces it with death. We are born to work and to die. We may find occasional joys, but they do not last. The disease of sin has brought the curse of death to every member of the human race.

Feeling as good as dead, ten lepers stood far off and cried for mercy. They wanted a cure for leprosy, the restoration of their flesh, health, reunion with their friends and family, a place in society. Jesus gave them all of that. But their desire was too small. They did not understand their own prayer. His mercy would go further. It would not stop until they were completely healed. He would clean their souls, adopt them as sons, keep them safe in His perfect love.

Out of ten lepers one came back to thank Jesus that day. He had worked a miracle for all ten of them. On the way to show themselves to the priests, they all discovered that they were now healed of their terrible disease. Now they could return to their homes, their loved ones, and to the lives they once lived before contracting leprosy. How happy they must have all been! Jesus gave them back their lives!

Nine didn't return. We look down on them, but it is easy for us to be like the nine who did not give thanks. It is so common for us to say thank-you to someone without really meaning it, and so often in the home it goes unsaid. How much more do we fail to thank the most important one of all, the Lord God, who created and sustains us each day of our lives, who has healed us from the disease of sin?

We worry about our lives and put our trust in ourselves to improve and sustain our lives. Yet St. Paul writes, "do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." This is difficult for us to do. I suspect Lincoln had more on his mind than mercy and pardon from sins during the Civil War, a little anxious or worried about what would happen to the country. Or as the Pilgrims settled, when the cold winter months killed many, imagine telling them to be anxious about nothing. And even today, with a slowing economy, ongoing wars, terrorism, and real earthly needs, it is difficult to be anxious about nothing.

The agony we sinners bring upon ourselves is considerable. Instead of praying for God's help with hearts that are content and thankful for the blessings of the present, we are tempted to make an idol of things of the world. This idolatry leads us to sin, and our sin places us under the curse of death.

We, like the leper, were once under the curse of death. We too cry out, "Lord, have mercy" praying that our Lord will heal us from sin and death. Jesus healed us, lifting the curse of death from us. No longer do we exist only to work and die. What perfect healing he has given us. He has given us back our lives.

So, why did this leper return? To give thanks. He was polite. He was doing the right thing. Yet Our Lord said to him, "Your faith has made you well." He was not talking about physical well-being. Faith did not cure him of leprosy. The Word of Our Lord did that, even as it did also to the nine who did not return. He spoke and they were all clean. This man returned and worshiped Jesus and was healed by faith through and through, body and soul. All ten were healed of leprosy, but only one had faith. His faith saved him. The others were healed but not saved.

As the lepers cried out for mercy, Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem to make the final sacrifice. The suffering of Christ on the cross, the beating he took, is what lifts this curse of death and gives us pardon and mercy.

You have been given this same gift. Baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you received the healing faith in Christ's death for the forgiveness of sins. God brings you into his presence and answers the cry for mercy and gives you mercy.

I recently read a short article about the feel-good benefits of a gratitude attitude – of the benefits of positive thinking from the world's perspective. Some say that pretending to be thankful raises levels of the chemicals associated with pleasure and contentment; serotonin and dopamine. The thought then expressed is that if you pretend long enough to be thankful perhaps the real thing will come along because of the feel-good benefits of pretending. One study indicated that people who wrote down what they were grateful for felt 25 percent happier than those who did not. Other researchers warned against overdoing gratitude and burning yourself out so that being thankful loses its meaning. In other words – package your gratitude to feel good but not to the point where you get weary with it all and feel bad.

God help us not to pretend and not to pursue a thankful heart for its feel-good benefits. Rather, on this national day of Thanksgiving and on all our days, God enliven our grateful remembering by His own remembering. For you see, when God remembered His loving kindness, Christ took on flesh in the womb of a virgin to redeem us. When God remembered His compassion, Christ had compassion for us and healed us of the leprosy of our sin. On Calvary the healing medicine was poured out by the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

On this Thanksgiving, you may think that you are not as thankful as you ought to be, but your record of thankfulness before God may be better than you think. In Christ, your account of thankfulness is perfect. As we see our sinful selves infected with the leprosy of sin, Christ gives himself on the cross to cleanse you, to answer the plea for mercy. As you are given Christ's cleansing gifts of forgiveness you are also giving thanks and praise to him who is worthy of praise. Our saying thanks is not what saves us, but the gift of faith in Christ gives us pardon and mercy.

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Amen.