

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Our Gospel text is surely about “giving thanks.” After all, we hear it every year on Thanksgiving Day. That will surely be the theme of the preaching on our National Day of Thanksgiving, but that’s not the main focus of all of today’s assigned texts as a whole. It’s still there, but today, the focus is more on God’s mercy.

Remember, the collect of the day “collects” the thoughts of the texts and puts them into a prayer of the day. We prayed: “Almighty God, You show mercy to Your people in all their troubles. Grant us always to recognize Your goodness, give thanks for Your compassion, and praise Your holy name.”

And consider the introit where we praised the Lord who “*answered me and delivered me from all my fears,*” who “*hears and delivers [the righteous] out of all their troubles.*”

In the Gospel today, we heard of men with plenty of trouble ... ten men ... ten lepers. We’re not very familiar with leprosy in the United States. It was prevalent in Jesus’ day, but it is not just a disease of antiquity. Still, according to the National Institute of Health’s National Center for Biotechnology Information, “Leprosy is rare in the United States, with only about 150 new cases reported each year” (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3138484/). Thankfully, today there are treatments for it, and “the disease can be cured” (www.cdc.gov/leprosy/index.html).

But back then, the infectious skin disease of leprosy was dreaded. The law of Moses obliged the “*leprous person [to] wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose.*” Should anyone approach him, he had to “*cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean,’*” for they were considered not just physically, but also ceremonially unclean. The leper was required to “*live alone,*” although lepers would congregate into colonies. But their “*dwelling [had to] be outside the camp*” (Lev. 13:45-46). Yes, in antiquity, the person with leprosy had plenty of trouble.

Thus, as Jesus is traveling along the border between Samaria and Galilee and enters into a village, these lepers meet Jesus, but stand at a distance. Luke doesn’t report their crying out “unclean,” but he does report that they cried out to Jesus: “*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.*” They had likely heard of the rabbi who could heal many “*of their infirmities*”—even leprosy, for He had done it before, and “*the report about him [had been spread] abroad*” (Luke 5:15).

They had come to the right place, for Jesus was not only a good master—in the sense of being a good teacher; He was κύριος—Lord—and He had dominion over all things: over wind and sea, over demons and unclean spirits, and over blind

eyes, stopped up ears, and weak limbs that would not support the body. Even more, Jesus was the Lord, “*gracious and merciful*”; great were His works (Ps. 111:4, 2).

The Lord Jesus was merciful, and He did show mercy to the ten lepers, but He didn’t check first to see if they believed in the Christ who was promised to come. That was not made a prerequisite for His mercy, just as He had healed many before without asking for a token of their faith ... just as He had fed the thousands because they were hungry, without asking them to confess the faith. Isn’t that what Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount tells us is God’s way? That “*he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust*” (Matt. 5:45)?

Paul and Barnabas similarly tell the Gentiles in Lystra that God “*did good by giving [them] rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying [their] hearts with food and gladness,*” and He did it even while allowing “*all the nations to walk in their own ways*” (Acts. 14:16-17). Luther reminds us, too, when we pray the Fourth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, that “God certainly gives daily bread to everyone without our prayers, even to all evil people”; that is, He has mercy not just on believers, but also on unbelievers.

Regarding the ten lepers, Jesus told them all “*Go and show yourselves to the priests.*” They all obeyed, and “*as they went they were cleansed*”; they were healed of this dread disease. Praise the Lord!

But Jesus did miracles not just to show mercy; He did them to bear witness about Himself, for who could do such marvelous things except God Himself, in this case, God’s Son? Paul said that God showed the Gentiles mercy, not leaving “*himself without witness*” (Acts 14:17). And John testifies that “*Jesus did many other signs*” that were not even written down. But, for our sake, many were written down “*so that [we] may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing [we] may have life in his name*” (John 20:30-31).

For although Jesus came to open eyes and unstop ears, strengthen legs, and loosen tongues, Jesus Himself says that His purpose was to serve us for the sake of salvation. “*For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*” (Mark 10:45). Or St. Paul: “*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*” (1 Tim. 1:15). Jesus came not just to show mercy, but especially to bestow grace unto salvation ... grace received by faith.

Only one of the ten lepers showed that he had gotten this message from Jesus. Only one of the ten showed that he understood who it was that healed him, and who it was that could also save him, body and soul. The other nine displayed an unbelief that would not see God in Jesus, that did not see Jesus as the Christ, their

Savior. The nine obediently continued on their way to Jerusalem to show themselves to the priests, just as the Law required, just as Jesus had commanded ... but such obedience would not save them.

The one, on the other hand, returned to Jesus, praising God in Christ Jesus, falling on his face before the Lord, his King, and giving Him thanks. His response bore witness: he had received more than mercy for his body; this one had been given the grace to believe, the grace and faith that saves: *“by grace you have been saved through faith ... it is the gift of God”* (Eph. 2:8). And so, Jesus said to the one — a Samaritan at that — *“Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well,”* body and soul, for the verb used here and its perfect tense tells us that Jesus is not talking about being healed now, but about being saved eternally: your faith has saved you.

“Arise and go your way,” Jesus said to the one. Where did he go? Luke doesn't tell us, but I suggest he went to Jerusalem as Jesus commanded. He still needed to show himself to the priests to be declared clean. He may have even accompanied Jesus, for remember: Jesus had *“set His face to go to Jerusalem”* (Luke 9:51). Jesus was going there to offer up the once for all sacrifice for us, a lamb led to the slaughter to shed the blood that would cleanse us from all our sins. Therefore, perhaps the one went to Jerusalem with Jesus to witness the fulfillment our salvation by cross and death.

We can't know for certain where the one went after his encounter with Jesus, but we today still know where to encounter Him. We know that He still has mercy on us and is gracious to us. We, on whom the Lord has had mercy and bestowed His grace, we who were once ourselves far off but have been brought near by our Savior, we who have been saved through faith know to return to the Lord with praise, fall on our knees, partake of more of His grace, and give thanks. You might know it as the “Eucharist,” which means “thanksgiving”; but probably you know it better as the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion.

What we call it is not as important as what happens there. Christ is there for us, ready to serve up His grace — forgiveness, life, and salvation; and He welcomes our faithful response of thanksgiving. Come! The meal is ready.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.