

Lk 17:18 "Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

Several weeks ago Pastor Punke and I were speaking about favorite church holidays and when I said Thanksgiving was on the top of my list, he gave first place to Easter and second place to Christmas. Whatever the holiday is, we know some people will find good reason ~~for~~ not to be here. Christmas Eve church attendance is generally good and we will see people we have not seen for the past year. Christmas morning has given way to waiting for the NFL/AFL football games to begin. Macy's parade ~~is~~ began at the same time as his church service <sup>and</sup> has effectively removed God from Thanksgiving, even though the holiday is about God.

If we had to choose the day on which our nation was conceived, it would be the day when about 200 subjects of King James surreptitiously left England in 1620. They did like to be told by the king how to worship. Liturgical nonconformity came with stiff fines. Some were buried <sup>at</sup> sea. Of the 102 who survived ocean voyage, half succumbed to the cold New England winter and still a year later the survivors found reason to thank God with a three day feast featuring a menu that most of us could not afford of; wild game, clams, oysters, lobsters. Before landing in Massachusetts, they signed an agreement known as the Mayflower Compact on how they would govern themselves and this set the tone for how we still govern ourselves. If the Pilgrims left us a legacy, it would be that we must resist government intervention in our worship and that even in the most difficult times we ~~et~~ must give thanks to God who governs life and death. Thanking God is only an intensified form of faith, since by thanking him we acknowledge that we are dependent on him for who we are and for everything we have, Thanksgiving also recognizes that we are dependent on those who went before us like those who built this beautiful edifice so that they would have a permanent place to come together on Sundays, where we can <sup>bring our</sup> children and catechumens by baptism into the kingdom of God, a place

to bless our marriages, a place where at death we could commend the souls of our fellow believers to Christ with prayers and hymns of thanksgiving. The Missouri Synod Lutherans have their own Thanksgiving story. When the German authorities imposed on them a liturgy which would have compromised their belief that the Holy Communion as the body and blood of Jesus, they boarded four ships for America. One ship never showed up at the port of New Orleans and its passengers, unknown to us, are martyrs for whom we give thanks.

Thanksgiving defines us as believers in Christ and this is what the gospel of the ten lepers is all about, even though the ten leprous men seem to have little to do with thanksgiving. No feasting, no celebration, just ten men who were just as physically ugly and decrepit on inside as they were on the outside.. Misery loves company and theirs was an enforced misery. We all die but lepers die limb by limb.

We are not told that they came to know about Jesus, but they believed he could heal them. Jesus had to be divine in some sense. They followed the usual protocol for lepers and kept their distance and very much like we do in our liturgy, they prayed "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy." This was not melodious chanting but they screeched <sup>is</sup> lie unconsolable babies with colic. Theirs was a plea for relief from the pain and sickness from which no one is immune. Misery belongs to the genetic code and no one can escape it.

Let's briefly rehearse the story of the ten lepers. Jesus heals all ten and tells them to go to the priest so their health can be certified and they now can go back to their homes and have a drink or two with friends. They actually saw their rotten flesh restored to the pure flesh of a baby. It was a day of resurrection, like the valley of the dry bones coming together in the Book of Daniel. Each was given a new lease on life and each was thankful to God. And <sup>is</sup> her comes the crux of the story . Only the Samaritan recognized that the one who had healed him was God

himself.

So we are back to our own Thanksgiving Day. There are those who can go further than congratulating themselves for what they have and accomplished, especially in comparison to what others don't have. Then there are those whose thanks can be summarized in the children's prayer 'God is great, God is good and we thank him for this food,' a prayer that could be said by a Jew or a Moslem, or a Hindu or a Buddhist or Shintoist . This is the most that even the most religious people can say. They are thankful in some kind of general sense, but not to the God who can only be known in Jesus. Without taking the first step in giving thanks to God, the second step in recognizing what he is done is meaningless. So the words of Jesus loom over this Thanksgiving Day "Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"