



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

A Stephen Ministry Congregation

www.goodshepherdwi.org

Thanksgiving Day

November 22, 2018

“Gratitude and Wellness”

(Luke 17:11-19)

Rev. David K. Groth

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Almighty God, Your mercies are new every morning and You graciously provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may acknowledge Your goodness, give thanks for Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience all our days; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Thanksgiving Day! It's one of my favorite days, actually. I like everything about this day . . . even the stuff on T.V. I like to take in a little bit of the Macy's Day Parade while working in the kitchen, and a little bit of the Westminster Dog Show too, always rooting for the sporting dogs (and not the poodles). Getting together with family and friends for a nice meal capped off with pie and coffee which is capped off with a little Sheepshead. I love it all! And through it all there is this wonderful thread of gratitude . . . not just aimless gratitude, but gratitude directed, and focused on God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This gratitude brightens the day and sweetens it too.

This thread of gratitude takes us back to the very basics of the Christian faith. Gratitude is the first and most important response to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. That is, at the heart of Christian experience and teaching is not guilt or obligation or obedience, but gratitude: gratitude pure and simple for God's unconditional, unearned love and mercy in Jesus Christ. Gratitude because all of life, all of it, is a gift we did not earn but were given.

One time Jesus was on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem and on the road he encountered ten men, each suffering from leprosy. That is to say they were physically sick, highly contagious and therefore socially isolated. They also thought themselves spiritually condemned because it was widely assumed they must have done something to earn their disease. End result? No one wanted to have anything to do with them, not even their families. They were a lonely colony of suffering, the company of the miserable. Their only hope is for a miracle, nearly as rare then as today.

However, when they see Jesus, they see their chance. They shout out to him, "Jesus, master, have mercy on us." And he did.

“Go, show yourselves to the priests,” he said, the ones who could certify that the leprosy was gone and the person was once again fit for normal human relationships. On the way, they were made clean. They are extraordinarily happy about it. They’ve just been given their lives back, and they’re intent on re-engaging with life. They are desperate to see their families, embrace their wives, play with their children.

One of the ten catches himself. He stops in his tracks, turns around, and runs back to find Jesus. Falling at Jesus’ feet, he thanks him.

Jesus asks about the other nine, and then says something very interesting that sometimes we miss or overlook. “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.” The thing is, we don’t know anything about this man’s faith. Yes he is a Samaritan, but we don’t know what his theology is and it’s precarious to make assumptions about such things based on geography. We don’t know a thing about his moral values, whether he is a Republican or a Democrat, for or against gun control. We don’t know who he voted for a couple of weeks ago, or whether he was a “yes” or a “no” vote for the Watertown school referendum. All we know is that he recognized a gift when he saw it and returned to say thank you to Jesus for it. And Jesus in turn said to him, “Your faith has made you well.” That makes me think that faith and gratitude are *very* closely related, that faith without gratitude is not possible, and that gratitude to God is a big part of what it means to have faith. “Your faith has made you well.” It also makes me think that there is something life-giving about gratitude to God in Jesus.

Notice the man’s wellness is more than being rid of his dread disease. Being able to say thank you to Jesus is at the very heart of God’s plan for each of us. And yet, it’s not something that comes naturally, is it. As children, we need to be taught how to say thank you, or it may not happen. Sometimes eliciting a simple thank you from children is like pulling teeth.

Several weeks ago about a hundred costumed children showed up at my home. They all made the same,

simple request in the same sing-song voice: “Trick or treat!” to which I would reply, “Take one please.” I’m happy to say most of the kids in Watertown are well trained by their parents to say, “Thank you.” Some of the kids, however, immediately turned to scope out the other houses on our block that had their porch lights on. Again, from the sidewalk or driveway the parents would intervene. “What do you say?” And again, the sing-song voice: “Thank you.”

Gratitude doesn’t come naturally or easily. It’s not just a problem for children. Part of what’s wrong with the human condition is that we often feel at the center of things. We feel entitled and deserving. We can get it into our heads that we are mostly self-sufficient and that whatever we have we’ve earned by hard work and determination. Nine of the ten lepers did not return to Jesus. So, in this account of the one who does, there are actually two healings going on: one is from leprosy, and the other, even more important, is from ingratitude. From Jesus perspective, ingratitude is sinful and life-threatening, it is a sin that threatens our health and well-being.

C.S. Lewis famously observed that the healthiest people he knew were the grateful ones, the ones always thanking. “Praise,” he said, “is inner health made audible.” Conversely, the unhealthiest people, the cranks and malcontents are the ones who don’t know how to give thanks, but instead are constantly griping, demanding, and have many, many grievances. Their grumbling and complaining is also inner health (or the lack thereof) made audible. That is, there’s something very unwell about ingratitude. Side note: I challenge you to not let the politics of this era get in the way of you being grateful.

“Your faith has made you well” Jesus said to the Samaritan. The only thing we know about that man’s faith is that he was grateful to Jesus.

Every year, it seems, there are new studies that show that Jesus knew exactly what he was talking about. Just this morning there was another article about how grateful people have a health edge on not-so-grateful people. That one way

you can improve your health is through a regular dose of gratitude. There's evidence that grateful people get better sleep, are more generous and confident, have decreased occurrences of depression and anxiety and boozing. Grateful people are generally more optimistic and hopeful. There are also links between gratitude and a stronger immune system (*Their Cups Runneth Over*, WSJ, 11/21/18).

In a book he wrote shortly before he died, Lewis Smedes said, "When it comes to gratitude, we who are old have an advantage. We have more good gifts to remember and therefore more opportunities to be grateful for them." At the age of eighty-one, Smedes said he remembered "magnificent things and little things" and felt grateful for both. "I remember that Jesus died to do whatever needed doing to let the river of God's love sweep me to himself, and I remember [also] the Velcro that makes it easy to put on my shoes. I remember [my mother], and [I remember] our first garage door opener . . . Big things, little things, it matters little . . ." (*My God and I*, p. 170). It's a way of seeing the world, and the important thing is to return regularly to God to praise and thank him for it.

Now, how does our gratitude as Christians look different than anyone else just trying to do their best and be their best? I think the answer is we know Who to thank. Our gratitude has a very specific focus. The Samaritan came back to Jesus. Our gratitude also ultimately goes back to Jesus. That's the faith that makes us well. We know Who to thank for our lives. We know Who to trust with our lives. We know Who really is concerned about our lives and has plans for us too; not just for today but forever. We know who went to the cross in order to make us well, to wash us clean with his blood. If the wages of sin is death, then forgiveness leads to eternal health and well-being. So faith in him is what makes us well. Gratitude to him makes us well.

It's more than singing out a "thank you." It's more than a ritual of politeness. Gratitude is a way of looking at the world, that regardless of how rich or poor, healthy or

sick, surrounded with family or lonely . . . regardless of our station or status in life, each of us has One who loves us unconditionally, One who has compassion for us, who hurts when we hurt. Each of us has One who has cleansed us of the leprosy of sin, and therefore each of us has One who has given us our lives back, the priceless gift of eternal life. His name, of course, is Jesus. He is the Christ and in him there is healing, life and salvation. Whoever we are, therefore, however we are feeling, “our cups runneth over” because God has already taken care of the big things, the most important things, the essential things. He has already reconciled us to Himself. Ultimately, therefore, our gratitude is directed to Him, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Whoever we are, whatever our circumstances, our gratitude is directed to him.

The Bible does not say, “Give thanks to the Lord, for we are feeling good.” It says, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good and his mercy endures forever.”

That’s the faith that makes us well. Amen.

