

“At Jesus’ Feet, Giving Him Thanks”

(Luke 17:11-19)

Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. One of the greatest joys and privileges I get to enjoy as your pastor is to make visitations. In my estimation while preparing and then delivering sermons in order to proclaim the life-giving Word of Christ is crucial in the holy ministry, there are certain other tasks which are indispensable for keeping pastors as pastors. If not for visitations, pastors become distant and detached from the people of God. If a pastor does not conduct visitations with his people he loses his identity as a shepherd. Visitations keep the spirit of pastoral ministry alive and I have discovered over the years that no matter how challenging those visitations may be, I am *always* blessed through them. God’s people bless me when I visit them. You bless me when you permit me to visit you.

It’s an interesting state of affairs, because it’s one of those things that tempts us to say, “Oh, but we’re all just so busy and I don’t want to be a burden!” But the fact of the matter is that when you permit me to visit you; permitting to at least try to answer your questions; and when you allow me to pray with you, to share God’s Word with you while applying it to your unique circumstances, or when you allow me to share God’s holy absolution with you, you bless me; and you help me to remain a pastor and not just someone who stands in front of you on Sunday mornings. I cannot begin to describe how there is really nothing better than spending time with God’s people, esp. from the standpoint that these visitations represent ongoing training to say nothing of living in the Spirit’s love. Think about it: the Holy Spirit who created the heavens and earth and who is the author of the gift of faith lives in His people, He lives in you. So when I see you and we share our faith, the Holy Spirit is molding and training us, refining our faith and making us stronger in Christ. He continues to train me through you.

In our Lutheran Confessions we teach that one of the means of grace – how God comes to us in His Word to feed and strengthen our faith – is through “the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren (Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord, Smalcald Articles, IV*, p 310).” That is, all that I’ve said about my visiting you, is also true when *you* visit another brother or sister in Christ. How good it is for us to live as God’s people when fellow church members become friends and meet each other in order to encourage and love one another!

This past week was no exception for me. I was seeing Gladys Geisler and once again I was extremely blessed. Without getting into personal details, let me just say that Gladys has not had an easy go of it as of late. She’s battling with some physical ailments and what

confronts many people in their 90's; she has spent a lot of time in bed. But with all of this going on and while having every reason to complain but refusing to do so, after some hymns and receiving the Holy Sacrament, I asked her for her prayer requests that I could take with me as I left the Geisler residence. She thought about it for a second with a smile on her face and then with sincerity and joy she said to me: "Pray that we would be *thankful* for all the Lord's gifts to us." I'm sure Gladys doesn't realize what an impact her words had on me. What an example! What a shining light of faith! With all of her troubles and with all of her weaknesses, her concern, her prayer, her meditation was and is *thanks* to God; thanks for all of His gifts; thanks in-spite of all the hardships, thanks. I was blown away and suddenly felt ashamed that I should complain about anything. I was immediately inspired and trained by my mother in Christ, Gladys Geisler. Her prayer request is that we would be *thankful*!

This leads me to think more carefully about the spiritual battle we face every day, so I challenge you this week dear Christian that when your own sin and the evil one tempts you to complain: think about what you have to be thankful for. If it helps, take a piece of paper and write down ten things that you're thankful for and rejoice! There is nothing like thanks to squash the complaints that fill our soul. Saint Paul writes in Philippians 4: *"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things (v 8)."*

What is more, I learned from Luther that we can even be thankful when the devil himself assaults us. I continue to love this quotation from Luther:

"When the devil accuses us and says: 'You are a sinner; therefore you are damned,' then we can answer him and say: 'Because you say that I am a sinner, therefore I shall be righteous and be saved.' 'No,' says the devil, 'you will be damned.' 'No,' I say, 'for I take refuge in Christ, who has given Himself for my sins. Therefore, Satan, you will not prevail against me as you try to frighten me by showing me the magnitude of my sins and to plunge me into anguish, loss of faith, despair, hatred, contempt of God, and blasphemy. In fact, when you say that I am a sinner, you provide me with armor and weapons against yourself, so that I may slit your throat with your own sword and trample you underfoot. You yourself are preaching the glory of God to me; for you are reminding me, a miserable and condemned sinner, of the fatherly love of God, who 'so loved the world that He gave His only Son, etc.' (John 3:16). You are reminding me of the blessing of Christ my Redeemer. On His shoulders, not on mine, lie all my sins. For 'the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all,' and 'for the transgressions of His people He was stricken' (Is. 53:6, 8). Therefore when you say that I am a sinner, you do not frighten me; but you bring

me immense consolation' (Luther, *Luther's Works, AE Volume 26, 36-37*).” Luther practiced being thankful even when he was reminded of his own sins! That’s the way to live!

Several weeks ago, I was sparing a black belt at my Tae Kwon Do school. The ball of my right foot rammed into his left knee cap as he raised his leg to block my kick. It was highly effective and caused me to limp during the healing process. Last week early Monday morning while walking to teach a class, all of a sudden I realized that I was walking without hindrance. I felt like a kid! I’m walking again! This was a gift from God, this was something to be thankful for! Last week I celebrated Christina turning 16! I am so thankful for her! Today I celebrate Elizabeth turning 24! I am so thankful for her too! Recently I pointed out to Elizabeth: “Do you realize that you are turning half my age?” Elizabeth said, “Oh no, I’m getting old!” I said, “Thanks a lot!” I’m thankful for the gift of laughter! Think about all you have to be thankful for. The list is much longer than what you might think!

But at our core we are not naturally thankful. And this comes out in a powerful way in today’s Gospel from Luke 17 beginning at verse 11. It is easy for us to take the account of the ten lepers for granted. We have a very hard time grasping the magnitude of their suffering. Not only were they struck by a terrible disease, but they were considered unclean outcasts in Israel. Dr. Ludwig elaborates:

“Perhaps the most palpable reason for this alienation is that sickness conferred on the person a stigma of ‘shame.’ No wonder disease was so dreaded in Israel. It seems to have brought with it the added distress of estrangement from human comfort. The diseased person was made to feel, by cultural tradition and religious sanctions, repulsive to his friends and family (Ps. 88:8; Isa. 54:12). This became part of the experience of illness and the implications of sickness. Listen again to the cry of the sick man in Psalm 38: ‘My heart pounds, my strength fails me; even the light has gone from my eyes. My friends and companions avoid me because of my wounds, my neighbors stay far away. (vv. 10-11)...Lepers were especially treated as outcasts and, according to Levitical law, were made to cry out their shameful presence to all who approached them (Lev. 13:45-46). It is clear from the Old Testament narratives that sickness was a tragic burden to bear, essentially because it symbolized the deepest kind of pain. Not simply the pain of the disease, but the deeper psychological and spiritual pain of being cut off from the fellowship of the community...(Order Restored, 70-71).”

Can you imagine such misery and yet it was through these suffering lepers that the Early Church was inspired to establish one of the key parts (ordinaries) of the Christian liturgy called the *Kyrie Eleison* which means “Lord have mercy” (though here in Luke 17 we have the longer version of this as the lepers actually cried out, ***“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us (v 13).”***).

The lepers are an image of us in our sin. We too have leprosy and it is the more devastating type since it has invaded our hearts and minds. Our insides are unclean and our sin makes us outcasts in relation to God's purity and holiness. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves in our spiritual leprosy and in sin we are outcasts from God's Kingdom. How often have we felt as outcasts after what we have done and after what we have said...no wonder we feel like we are isolated and we can feel this way even in relation to God who passes by -- so it seems at times -- only at a distance. *And **yet** there is one thing by God's grace that we do. We cry out like the lepers, "Lord have mercy!"*

What happened next is quite simply amazing. By law (Lev. 13:47-59; 14:1-32) the lepers could not show themselves to the priests until their disease had been overcome. What that means is that at the *moment* Jesus responded to their cry -- and it appears that He did so instantaneously; they did not have to qualify through some great work; they were not interviewed to see if they qualified or were worthy...there was only a terrible need and a desperate cry to Jesus: "Lord have mercy!" -- (and in giving them the command to show themselves to the priest, v 14), they were being healed as they went! Now that's grace my friends! This is what our Lord does for you. He heals you of your leprosy as one who can do but one thing: beg for mercy and mercy is given. Your sin is removed. This is how much Jesus loves you!

The commentary on our lack of thanks, however, is stunning. All ten were healed, but only a Samaritan comes back to Christ and is the Lord who says that it was his faith that made him well (v 19). But wait! Wasn't it the Lord who healed him? Yes it was! So why does the Lord say it was his faith that made him well? Recall from last week: it is not the size of the faith or the outer greatness of the faith that matters, but it is what that faith holds on to; put in a different way: it is what that faith contains. And in the most simple terms: faith holds to Christ; faith "contains" Jesus, the Almighty God who by definition is uncontainable and yet, as is consistent with our Lord of miracles and overwhelming love permits Himself to be contained by His people (yes, this is a mystery, but it is also true)! This is what faith does.

But if this faith is not great in the eyes of the world, then it is great in the eyes of God, because God sees what flows from it: ***"[he] turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks (vv 16-17)." This is the new you, the "leper" who in receiving mercy is now overflowing with thanks...let us give thanks like Gladys said; like the Samaritan did moved by God's grace...let us come to the table of Christ's Body and Blood (the Eucharist, the "Thanksgiving") and see this as our chance to fall on our faces praising God for the blood of Christ which wipes away our sins and for the assurance that you***

are an outcast no more, but now one who belongs to the Lord welcomed into the Kingdom of God! Come, be healed, Jesus gives Himself to you once again in the Sacrament; once again let us cry out "Lord have mercy!" Once again let us return to Him giving Him thanks!