

Luke 17.11-19
Thanksgiving Day
22 November 2018
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Your faith is the thing it clings to. Let me say that again. Your faith is the thing it clings to, the thing which it is faith in.

Imagine, if you will, for a moment, some sort of instrument that could search for Christian faith in the heart and identify it. It wouldn't go looking for faith. It would go looking for Christ. For a heart that had been taken captive by Christ. For a heart that had laid all its hopes on Christ. In a sense, faith really isn't anything at all. For faith to be Christian faith, it must have Christ. And that's exactly what this Gospel teaches us today.

Of course, on this national holiday of Thanksgiving, that's a heretical opinion. People throughout our country will gather today around the bounty of an entire year. Make plans to spend more of it tomorrow. And they'll be optimistic. Optimistic about where life has taken them thus far. Optimistic that next year will be just as good if not better than this one. Optimistic that all their spending tomorrow will make for a very Merry Christmas, indeed.

And when they sit down for a dinner so big that 10 people can't possibly eat it all, they might pause for a few moments and go around the table to express their thanks. To one another. To life. To America. Maybe even to God. They may even shed tears of thankfulness. And get this: all of that they will likely consider and think to be *faith*.

And yet all that optimism. All that true gratitude. Even those tears—they are not yet faith. For Christian faith is not itself. Christian faith the thing to which it clings. Which is to say: Christian faith is having and holding Christ.

And that's exactly how we must hear Christ's words to the Samaritan who returned to Him when he had been healed: "Your faith has saved you." What saved the man wasn't his optimism about a better tomorrow. It wasn't his sincere gratitude at a gift 1,000 times better than 10 Thanksgiving dinners in a row—the gift of freedom from his leprosy. It wasn't even the tears of what—joy? relief? surprise?—that the overwhelming emotion forced out of him at his liberation from this curse of leprosy.

It was his faith. And hear me loud and clear now: "his faith" was nothing else than having and holding Christ. And look at what that did:

It not only healed him from his leprosy.

It saved him.

But how did things go from there to here. How did faith come? How did faith that saves come?

It can't have been easy. In fact, it never is.

Because here was a man who'd been dealt the kind of blow in life that you and I can't even imagine. The dreaded disease of leprosy.

He woke up one morning and his formerly clear voice was hoarse. There were bumps on his skin. He probably pretended for a couple of days or weeks that it was just a cold. And a rash. Bum luck. But as a few weeks turned into a few months. And as the skin condition didn't improve. And as his voice grew more hoarse. And as his fingers became gnarled, and his face disfigured—there was no pretending any more.

And if it was bad now, he knew it would only get worse. Gnarled fingers would wither. The disfigurement of his face would turn him into someone his own mother and father wouldn't be able to recognize. He'd be a horror to look at. A plague to be avoided.

Go home and google leprosy. And then hit images. You'll see what I mean. But not too close to dinner time.

And whether he had been a thoughtful person before or not, he was turned into one. Because the questions he had raced through his mind faster and fiercer.

Questions like, "Why me?" Questions like, "What have I done to deserve this?" Questions like, "If God is good and kind and all-powerful, how could this happen....And to me of all people?" Questions like, "What's the meaning and sense of my very existence if this is what it must be?" Questions like, "Is there even a God at all?"

And he wracked his brains for the evil he had done to be visited by this...evil. He cursed his own life. He cursed the day of his own birth. He cursed his parents who had brought him into the world.

And faith in God? Gimme a break. He didn't have faith in god. He cursed him. Because a God like that? You can't trust Him. And you sure you can't love Him. For he had been born for misery. And in misery he would die.

Just as every one of you. Born for misery, only to die in misery. That's your fate.

You came out of your mother's womb screaming. Not because that's just what babies do. Adam and Eve didn't bawl when they were given life. But neither had their misery begun.

Not so for you, because that's when your misery started. You were mad. Scared. Confused. Having no God.

And the first breath you took on this side of the birth canal wasn't just the first. It was the first of the last. Because over your head hung a fate you never asked for, begged for, or wanted—that the breath *you* were taking in would some day be taken away by *Another*. That you had been created by One only one day to be destroyed by that Same One.

That your life that began in the mysterious darkness of the womb would end in the horrifying darkness of the grave.

And that the God who had given you life—a life like *this*?

Why, He surely couldn't be trusted. And because He surely couldn't be trusted, He certainly couldn't be loved.

And faith? Faith? Out of the question. No, instead, God was inscrutable. Capricious. Unknowable. And you can't have faith in that. That'd be like asking a resident of Paradise, California, to trust, love, and have faith in...fire.

And for the curse that was your life, you cursed God. And lived in a breach of the commandment on which all others depend: You shall have no other gods before Me.

Nothing different from the Samaritan leper. Except that the graphic starkness of his situation maybe illuminates yours all the better.

So how did things go from there to here? Faith is trust. But you can't trust a capricious God.

Into the despair and darkness of the leper's life strode a Man who was no mere Man. Jesus, the Son of Mary. Jesus, the Son of God.

And Jesus, the Son of God, blew out of the water every preconception the leper had of God. Instead of a capricious God who may...or may not...even hear prayer, Jesus heard *and responded*. Instead of an inscrutable God who can never found, much less known, there Jesus stood right in front of the 10. In the flesh. And instead of the god they had dreamt up—one who delights in the meaningless torture of His hapless creatures, in their "deathward drift from futile birth"—Jesus saw their plight and came to them with a mercy far greater than they ever expected. He told them: "Go. Show yourselves to the priests." A promise! From God! God no longer my Enemy, but my Friend! God no longer against me, but *God for me! God on my side!*

And that's what the leper trusted. The promise. And the Promiser. For in Christ God had ripped off the mask behind which He was hidden and shown Himself as He truly is.

In the same way the Lord has strode into your life. Amid your chin-shaking, lip-quivering infant cries, He gave Himself to you as *your God*. And in no way different from the leper. But instead of blowing out of the water every preconception you had God, He used water to show you as the God He is.

For by water taken in His name and at His Word He made His death yours and His resurrection yours. And all His death and resurrection availed for and accomplished and won—the forgiveness of sins and everlasting salvation—He said, now belonged to you.

A promise! From God. Spoken over you at your Baptism and written in the blood of the Son of God shed for you.

And now God was no longer inscrutable and mysterious. You didn't have to guess what He thought of you any longer. You knew. He's the kind of God who wants to save you and did save you. That's what

your Baptism is and means: the God who saves has made Himself over to you as your Friend, not your Enemy. He has come. And He is on your side, not against you.

When the promise came to the leper, he trusted both promise and Promiser. He was given Christian faith. Faith in Christ. And it was the object of that faith—Christ—that made him well.

That's exactly what happened in your Baptism. In the water poured over your head you were given the Holy Spirit. And with the Holy Spirit faith to trust the promise. And in trusting the promise faith to trust the Promiser.

The Promiser? Christ Himself, in whose blood the promise is written. And His promise? Forgiveness of sins and everlasting life. Yours already.

Why? Because your faith has saved you. Which is to say: Christ has saved you.

But how easy it is in this life to lose sight of this faith—of this faith in Christ. Of faith as its object, and not faith as its own thing. And perhaps for some of you even right now, baptized children of God that you are, your faith is under assault. You look at your own life and ask, "This? How could the Lord possibly forgive *this*? My sin is too great. I can't flee it. I can't flee its consequences. I've made a mess of my own life."

That's what devil, world, and flesh would have you focus on, believe, and trust. They would empty your faith of Christ. And that's a misplaced faith. A faith that takes shelter in itself against an inscrutable God. A faith that must leave you uncertain.

But even right now. Even right now into the midst of your darkest moment, through His Word, there strides One who comes to you with a promise and with certainty. With a promise He's so serious about He's written it in His own blood. With a promise that's so vast that it swallows up even your darkest sin and cleanses your conscience even from the deepest stain of guilt. For this One whose promise is written in blood died once, for all. There's no sin too great, no guilt so inescapable but that He hasn't already blotted it out.

That's the meaning of the Gospel for today. Wherever you have Christ's Word—whether at font, pulpit, or altar—there you have His promise—that your sins are for Christ's sake forgiven. And because you have His promise, you have the Promiser. The One in whom you can anchor your faith.

And today, when you sit down to dinner and count your blessings, that's the kind of God you have: One who not only gives and provides you your daily bread, but One who has redeemed you by His blood. Rise! Go your way. Your faith has made you well!

Amen.

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