

Sermon – Thanksgiving Eve
Luke 17:11-19
November 22, 2017

“This is a Good Day”

It was a good day in March 1621 when those who remained of the 102 Pilgrims who had sailed from Plymouth, England aboard the Mayflower – about half of them - came ashore and met a Pawtuxet Indian named Squanto who just happened to speak English. He proceeded to show the malnourished Pilgrims how to cultivate corn, fish in local rivers and most important harvest good relations with other Native American tribes. When in November of 1621 the Pilgrim’s first corn harvest came in Governor William Bradford organized a three day feast –which we commemorate as our nation’s first Thanksgiving.

But it wasn’t until in 1789 that President George Washington issued a Thanksgiving Proclamation calling on all Americans to celebrate the happy conclusion to their war of independence. And it took another 74 years for Thanksgiving to become a national holiday, so decreed by President Abraham Lincoln, who in 1863, in the midst of the Civil War - when there was little to be thankful about - called upon Americans to *“commend to God’s tender care all those who have become widows and orphans, mourners and sufferers...and to heal the wounds of the nation.”* As we regularly say when we gather for worship *“it is indeed right and salutary that we should at all times and in places give thanks and praise to you God”*...even when “those times” aren’t the best of times.

It was a good day when 10 lepers met Jesus Christ. In those days all they could legally and socially do is cry out from a distance. I would have expected Jesus to put an end to the social stigma lepers carried by waltzing right up and laying his hands on the worst of their sores say; *“be healed”!* But he didn’t. He called back to them from a distance, *“go, and show yourselves to the priests”*. We’ll never know what was in their hearts and heads the moment they turned and went as instructed. Was this another brush off to which they had grown accustomed? It’s not hard to imagine some of them taking a few steps and then deciding going home or going back to the streets and their old, miserable existence was easier than another letdown. It’s not hard to imagine they thought they’d just been tossed an empty religious salutation from another Rabbi. You never know what will happen when you listen to Jesus though. By literally walking in faith their day suddenly became a very good day, maybe their first good day in a long, long time.

Our lesson says *“then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan.”* Earlier Luke told a story about a man of courage and compassion we’ve come to know as *“the good Samaritan”* and now he gives us *“the thankful Samaritan”*. All 10 of these men had cried for mercy and all followed Jesus’ command. All went to begin an Old Testament ritual from Leviticus - a complicated liturgy for cleansing lepers and making it permissible for them to step into public worship and out of public scorn.

Nine of them (the Samaritan would not have been allowed to) may have gone for the priestly cure before. But before they arrived at the temple their day, like the Samaritan's had become a very good one. It was the Samaritan alone who remembered that the bookend of a cry for mercy is a word of thanks to the Merciful One. That's the point of his being identified.

Yet this Samaritan is really just like the other nine which makes him like you and I. We like they have our setbacks and crisis', we like they have days that are a breeze and days we feel like we're about to be blown away. "*Lord have mercy*" - a prayer which identified these ten men as beggars, is thus our prayer too. I mention this because the origins of Thanksgiving in our country were terrific hardship. The Pilgrims lost half their numbers between the fall of 1620 and the spring of 1621, and who knows what would have happened if when they came ashore they'd been met by hostility instead of kindness? In 1789 our nation was in its tenuous infancy, with not much wealth nor as much unity as our history books suggest, and yet our President said; "*America, give thanks.*"

And then there is the audacity of Lincoln, prodded by a fellow citizen named Sarah Josepha Hale – famous for her little bitty poem "*Mary Had a Little Lamb.*" Lincoln, just months after the battle of Gettysburg and weeks after his famous address there instituted a day of thanksgiving and said it should be a perpetual one in our nation. Yet he wanted the occasion to call the nation to pray for healing and remember those who most needed it. Healing and thanksgiving go well together – so said Lincoln and so said a Samaritan leper. Over the years we've tended to use Thanksgiving celebrations as "*count your blessings*" time. That's what the Samaritan in our story did. But I wonder if we might also recall the admonition of Lincoln and use Thanksgiving Day to pray for healing in our land more often. It still needs some.

"*God, be merciful to us*" we could say, "*and forgive us when we're either not so merciful or worse are forgetful.*" It's always a good day whenever in such a way we pray. Dear Child of God and citizen of a blessed country - may God grant you and us, a very good day. AMEN

