

Grace and peace to you . . .

True worship of God is not primarily about thanks, though that is what many would have you believe. They insist that true worship is thanksgiving. And true thanksgiving, they say, must come from the heart. It must not be held back or pressed into liturgical forms, but must be free and boundless, full of praise and celebration and joy. So, they say, worship must be lively, upbeat and cheery. Or else it is false thanks, and so false worship.

But true worship is not primarily about thanks. True worship of God is faith in God. To worship Him is to trust in His mercy and take Him at His Word. True worship is to rely on His sacramental gifts. To use the words of the Large Catechism, "True worship and service of God takes place when your heart directs all its trust and confidence only toward God and does not let itself be torn away from Him."

In today's Gospel, you see an example of true worship. Confident that Jesus not only can, but will come through for them, ten men who were lepers lifted up their voices and said, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" These words are echoed in the divine service every Sunday: "Kyrie eleison! Lord, have mercy!" Here you ask the Lord to be compassionate. You are asking a lot when you beg God for mercy. "Lord, do not turn a deaf ear to my prayer, and do not deal with me as I deserve, but suspend Your righteous judgment and set aside Your wrath and relent from Your fierce anger, and have mercy on me. Do not leave me to my own devices! Do not forsake me even though I often forsake You! Be the Jesus I trust you to be, the Jesus in whom I hope, the Jesus to whom I look in every need. Have mercy on me, and heal me."

That is the prayer of these lepers. All ten of them cry out. All ten of them worship the Lord. All ten of them trust in His mercy. And so it was that as they went, all ten were cleansed. Frankly, that is what astounds me. Not that only one returns, but that Jesus does not take back His mercy, His gift, His healing from those ungrateful nine. For that is what most men would do. But thankfully, Jesus is not like most men. And His mercy is not conditional like human mercy. Your Lord's mercy endures forever.

The Lord's mercy endures forever because it is not given as a result of your prayer or your faith. The Lord gives His mercy only because He chooses to be merciful; only because He wants to be compassionate, even to those who continually disappoint Him. And so the Sower recklessly scatters His Gospel seed. And the Lord is slow to anger, and quick to forgive. And Jesus does not interrogate the lepers or make them first prove themselves, but simply says, "Go, show yourselves to the priests."

What happens next is thankfulness. For while worship is not primarily about thanks, thanks is certainly is a fruit of faith. It is how faith receives the gift that Jesus is and gives. And so, "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God," not so God might do you good in return, and not because you need to prove the sincerity and genuineness of your worship and faith. But, "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God," because that is how faith receives the Lord as He comes to you in His Body and Blood, with thanks.

The great thanksgiving immediately before the Lord's Supper is not just pious words. Nor do we say it here at Bethany just because Christians have been saying that thanksgiving for nearly 2000 years, though it is found in first century liturgies. The great thanksgiving how you return to Jesus and worship Him, simply to receive more and more of whatever He chooses to say and give in whatever way He chooses to say it and give it.

And so the Samaritan returned, and with a loud voice glorified God, and worshiped at Jesus' feet, giving Him thanks. It was not that this man was emotionally overwhelmed, but that he could not get enough of Jesus. And so down on his knees he goes, his posture matching his prayer of faith. This prayer of faith has not changed. It is still, "Kyrie eleison! Lord, have mercy!" Faith is always ready to receive what Jesus gives. Your ears are receiving His Word, even as your mouth will soon open to receive His Body and Blood.

Jesus does not disappoint the thankful man, but is the gracious Lord whom the man believes He will be. And so the Lord says to him, "Arise, go your way. Your faith has made you well." Here the man receives from Jesus more healing like he got before, but this time given in a different way.

The other lepers miss out on the superabundant gifts of Jesus. For they are not so much ungrateful as they are unwilling to hear and receive more of the mercy Jesus gives. Their faith fades while the Samaritan's grows. They are content with what they have, while the Samaritan can not wait to hear and receive more. They are satisfied, while the cleansing of the Samaritan only produces a greater hunger and thirst for the gifts and blessings Jesus is and gives.

So true worship leads to true thanksgiving. Faith leads to the desire to have more of the same from Jesus. Thanksgiving is not the goal. Rather, the goal is Jesus who gives. Jesus is at the same time Gift and Giver. That is what produces the thanks which is a hunger and thirst for more and more of Him in His preaching and sacramental gifts and giving.

That is how your life gets to be. Like the Samaritan, the Lord Jesus has cleansed you and healed you of your leprosy. This cleansing took place in the waters of Holy Baptism. And you can walk away from the font confident that Jesus will not undo what He has done. But those baptismal waters are not the end. They lead you to give thanks—a giving of thanks that desires to hear again and again the forgiving, life-giving, life-saving words spoken over you in Holy Absolution; and a giving of thanks that leads right to the giving of the Eucharist.

And so this is true thanksgiving and true worship and true faith—not what you do for Jesus, not your celebrating Him in the way you think He should be celebrated. But simply to receive His Sacrament. For this is the “worship God Himself established and to which He bore witness that He was indeed well pleased with it. He has established it in such a way that it can never be exhausted or observed enough. For who remembers God sufficiently? Who can praise Him too much? Who can thank Him too much?”

So forget about what you think worship is or ought to be. Do not tell the Samaritan that his bowing down is wrong, or that he should have been more joyful or more spirit-filled. Nor focus on the pomp and ceremony, which only serve to beautifully adorn and express faith. Instead, if you want to engage in the true worship of God and honor the Lord and thank Him rightly, “then remember and participate in the Sacrament.” For the Lord is praised and glorified when you receive His own Body and Blood from His hand, and when you hear and believe the Word that comes from His mouth. And when you participate in this true thanksgiving with faith, then you will not bother with self-chosen forms of worship. Instead, like the Samaritan, you will simply return to get more and more of what Jesus desires to give you as He comes to you in His Body and Blood. Amen.