

The Sunday before Thanksgiving
“Now Thank We All Our God”
A Sermon by Rev. Ruth Ragovin
Based on Luke 17:11-19 and I Thessalonians 5:16-18
First Christian Church, Murray, KY
November 22, 2020



In this 1625 illustration, Londoners fleeing the plague are barred by country dwellers.
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Luke 17:11-19 (NRSV) ~ ¹¹*On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.* ¹²*As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance,* ¹³*they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”* ¹⁴*When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean.* ¹⁵*Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.* ¹⁶*He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.* ¹⁷*Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?”* ¹⁸*Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”* ¹⁹*Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”*

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NRSV) ~ ¹⁶*Rejoice always,* ¹⁷*pray without ceasing,* ¹⁸*give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

This Thursday many people around the country, including my husband and me, will loosen their belt buckles and gather for a special Thanksgiving feast that likely will include turkey, stuffing (some call it dressing), gravy, cranberry sauce, pumpkin pie, and other family favorites. In my case, the meal has to include good olives. Russ insists on having sweet peas and baby carrots. Rachel always wanted my special mashed potatoes. What do you eat on Thanksgiving and what are your special traditions? Lots of people watch sports on tv. Yet things will be a little different this year. For all those of you who have a Thanksgiving tradition of watching the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade with their huge floats and balloons, this year, because of Covid-19, there will be no crowds of spectators assembled on the streets but it will be a television only event on NBC and Telemundo, featuring a number of musical and theatrical performances. Even though Black Friday will again begin this year on Thanksgiving Thursday, the huge spending spree will hopefully look different this year with lots more online shopping and much less Covid-19 spreading in-person store shopping. If you do go to the stores, I hope you will fulfill Jesus' commandment of loving neighbor as self by wearing a mask!

The big difference we may see this Thanksgiving are smaller family gatherings. Indeed, some people may have to spend Thanksgiving all alone. This, of course, is incredibly sad. We have been warned by the Centers for Disease Control that if we want to help stop the spread of the pandemic we should refrain from traveling to family gatherings and only share our special meal with our nuclear family. NJ's Governor is begging people to "stay in their bubble" and Kentucky's Governor Andy Beshear has just issued a statewide order lasting through Sunday, December 13 to limit household gatherings to 8 people or less. Sayings are circulating such as: "*A Zoom Thanksgiving is better than an ICU Christmas*" and "*After big Thanksgiving gatherings, plan on small Christmas funerals. Stay home. Save lives.*" Just so you know, I believe it is our Christian responsibility to stay home to save lives. We should not be playing Russian roulette with this virus, as those of us at our church know, having just attended our beloved organist Donnie Hendrix's graveside service this past Thursday, on what would have been his 61st birthday.

With the daily count of Covid-19 rising, this year we might feel more kinship with the first Thanksgiving than last year's Thanksgiving. While from our early school days many of us have these idealized rosy pictures of the Pilgrims and Indians sitting together around tables overflowing with food, this actually was not the case on that first Thanksgiving. That first Thanksgiving was one of extreme hardship and suffering. Over half of the 101 settlers were dead and buried in unmarked graves. They had months of

disease and famine to endure in front of them. On Friday in America there were 1,947 deaths in one day with 3,000 per day projected in January. In our own community there were 55 new cases on Friday, and our community has mourned the passing of 17 loved ones. The numbers of food-insecure people in our country is unprecedented with people lining up for miles in their cars to receive food from Food Banks.

Yet, no matter what the circumstances, from our nation's beginnings we have felt called to a day of gratitude. President George Washington proclaimed November 26, 1790, as a national day of thanksgiving "for the many single favors of God." Congress (divided perhaps then as now) ignored his request for a national observance of Thanksgiving. This fell on Abraham Lincoln, who, in 1863, felt called upon to formally establish the first Thanksgiving Day right in the midst of the Civil War with countless dead and our nation's very survival in question. It was precisely because our nation was in a moment of crisis, that Lincoln said: ***"I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States ... to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens [and to] ...commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners, or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged..."*** This Thanksgiving week may we all take Lincoln's instructions to heart and, instead of focusing on Black Friday deals or complain because of what we might feel are unjust social distancing restrictions, instead continue to reach out to help those who are hurting in our community. A special thanks to Rebecca Landolt and David Robinson for overseeing our efforts to provide Thanksgiving Meals for many food-insecure families in our county! Thank you to all who contributed! Let's continue these and other efforts to reach out to those in need all year long as we give thanks to God with grateful hearts for all the many blessings in our lives!

Our scripture passage today points to the importance of expressing gratitude, of saying thank you, which is foundational to the celebration of Thanksgiving. In today's story, Jesus was traveling near the border between Samaria and Galilee on his way to Jerusalem. He passed by a group of lepers. They were struggling, hurting, in need, marginalized, misunderstood, ostracized outsiders. They had been ousted from society because they had a contagious skin disease. If a person had some kind of sore on their skin they were suspect of having a communicable disease and had to go to the priest to have it examined. I thought about that as I looked down on my hand, where there is presently a rather large wound where they removed something they thought might be a melanoma. Thankfully it was not but, back then, if someone had seen a sore like that on

my hand I might be sent into isolation. I might lose my family, my job, my livelihood, my sense of belonging and perhaps self worth. Listen to what it says in Leviticus 13:45 about how people were forced to live if, after examination, they were thought to have leprosy: ⁴⁵ ***The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, “Unclean, unclean.”*** ⁴⁶ ***He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.***

Because of their contagious skin disease, lepers, such as the ten in our story today, were ostracized and forced to live in isolation outside towns. They also were seen to be ritually impure and, subsequently, were denied access to the Temple and other Jewish holy places, which implied that they were not loved by God. They were even forced to cry out about themselves as they covered their upper lip, “Unclean! Unclean!” What must that have done to their self esteem? Whom do we deem “unclean” in our society? Who are our lepers? While, in relation to this scripture, we likely default into thinking that they are like people afflicted with HIV / AIDS, or perhaps even think about this passage in terms of those who are quarantining because of Covid-19, are there not others—because of attributes related to things such as race, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, socio-economic or legal status, disability—who bear a metaphorical stigma of being “unclean” and are then relegated to the status of “outsider” and “other”? Again, who are our lepers? How might Jesus treat them?

The lepers, who lived on the outskirts of society, saw Jesus and his disciples approaching. We imagine that they were filled with hope that he might see them and help them. The scriptures say that they abided by the social distancing rules imposed on them. Verse 12 says: ***“Keeping their distance, ¹³they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”*** This is kind of a version of the Jesus Prayer of the Orthodox Church: ***“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,”*** which is repeated over and over again, sometimes using a prayer rope. I imagine that the lepers repeatedly cried out for mercy. Help us! Have mercy on us! Jesus heard their cry. Having compassion on them, Jesus replied, ***“Go and show yourselves to the priest”*** (vs. 14). It was the priest’s duty to decide whether or not the person was healed. When we look at Leviticus chapter 13 we see that the priest wore two hats as both a spiritual leader and a medical diagnostician. If the priest declared the leper cured, she was free to rejoin family and friends. He no longer had to live on the outskirts of town and was accepted as a whole person and could partake in religious activities.

The ten lepers did exactly what Jesus asked them to do and went to show themselves to the priest. ***“And as they went,”*** writes Luke, ***“they were made clean”*** (vs. 14). They received the gift of healing and were free to rejoin their families and their friends. Free at last from this dreadful disease! The scriptures continue: ***¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him.***

Why did only one man cleansed from leprosy return to thank Jesus? Perhaps the other nine were too caught up in the moment, or thought they would see Jesus later and would thank him then, or wanted to wait to see if the cure was real, or felt entitled, or rationalized that they would have gotten well anyway, or perhaps they had not been taught good manners by their parents. Which of the lepers do you identify with? Do you find it surprising that nine out of the ten lepers did not express thanks to Jesus? I don’t. It seems to be a true reflection of our self-indulgent society that few can take the time to say thank you to others and, most importantly, move into a state of deep gratitude for all that God has blessed us with. In last week’s sermon I talked about how gratitude is at the very heart of the Christian faith. It is also what Thanksgiving is supposed to be about!

Gratitude is, without any doubt, the most important spiritual discipline there is. Gerald Good has said that: “If you want to turn your life around, try thankfulness. It will change your life mightily.” But even though nine of the ten lepers did not thank Jesus, there was one person in this story for whom gratitude was a spiritual discipline, who turned around, and whose life was changed mightily as a result of this. Who was the person who turned around? The scriptures continue that: ***... he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? ¹⁸Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”***

This foreigner. A Samaritan. A sort of cousin to the Jews from the other side of the railroad tracks with whom one should have nothing to do, but a member, albeit inferior, of the Abrahamic faith. Yet Jesus considered them of his fold, holding up the Samaritan yet again as an example of the one who had received the truest healing because, in addition to his physical healing, his heart had opened up in gratitude to praise God! Jesus said to him: ***“Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well”*** (vs. 19).

This Thanksgiving, as we gorge ourselves with food, let us spend some time moving into the sacred soul posture of profound gratitude. Alfred Painter has said: “Saying thank you is more than good manners. It is good spirituality.” Gratitude can affect in us a radical

change of heart, which will lead to a radical change in speech, and behavior, and a transformation of our lives. That is why it is good spirituality.

The Apostle Paul said: ¹⁶ *Rejoice always,* ¹⁷ *pray without ceasing,* ¹⁸ *give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you* (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). In all circumstances? That's a pretty tall order right now, isn't it? In this week leading up to Thanksgiving, many might wonder what we should give thanks for. It seems that on every side we are under assault: a pandemic leading to mass hospitalizations and rising deaths; schools and businesses closed; the doors of assisted living facilities, nursing homes, and hospitals closed to visitation; economic difficulties with so many out of work and mile long lines leading up to food pantries; a post-election national crisis that has no precedent for knowing how to move forward; racial unrest caused by the marginalization of whole groups of people we might think of metaphorically as our contemporary lepers.

Yet, when we feel anxious and afraid, we should remember that we are not the first in our nation to face difficult times. Abraham Lincoln instituted the national holiday of Thanksgiving in the midst of our nation's Civil War when countless people lay dead on battlefields. A hundred years ago, the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-1919 led to the deaths of 675,000 people in the United States. Two of my great grandparents on my father's side lost their lives during that. And then there was what we call the Great Depression, which began with the stock market crash of October 1929, leading to massive unemployment. What were Thanksgiving celebrations like during those times?

Brett Blair, on one of his sermons, shared the following about the Great Depression: "Back during the dark days of 1929, a group of ministers in the Northeast, all graduates of the Boston School of Theology, gathered to discuss how they should conduct their Thanksgiving Sunday services. Things were about as bad as they could get, with no sign of relief. The bread lines were depressingly long, the stock market had plummeted, and the term Great Depression seemed an apt description for the mood of the country. The ministers thought they should only lightly touch upon the subject Thanksgiving in deference to the human misery all about them. After all, what was there to be thankful for. But it was Dr. William L. Stiger, Pastor of a large congregation in the city that rallied the group. This was not the time, he suggested, to give mere passing mention to Thanksgiving, just the opposite. This was the time for the nation to get matters in perspective and thank God for blessings always present, but perhaps suppressed due to intense hardship." (Sermons.com) I couldn't agree more. The most heartfelt moments of thankfulness are not found in times of plenty, but when we face difficulties.

Were we gathering in our sanctuary on this Sunday before Thanksgiving, we would sing some traditional hymns saved especially for this day. We always open with “*Come, Ye Thankful People, Come,*” which Donnie played so magnificently on the organ, with Judy Hill accompanying him on the piano. For Communion we often sing “*We Gather Together.*” Every year our closing invitation hymn is “*Now Thank We All Our God.*” Do you remember this hymn? Do you know the story behind it? Have you ever heard of the Lutheran Minister Martin Rinkart?

Rinkart was born in 1586 in the German town of Eilenburg. Russ and I visited this town, about 20 km from Leipzig, when I had my Fulbright fellowship back in 1987 and spent a lot of time in what used to be East Germany. Rinkart studied theology at the University of Leipzig and then worked as a teacher and minister in a number of towns before returning to be the minister in Eilenburg in 1617, where he was to spend the rest of his life. Those of you who have studied European history will know that the following year the Thirty Years’ War broke out, which involved much of Europe. It was the bloodiest war ever fought on German soil. People began fleeing from the war and sought refuge in Eilenburg, because it was a fortified walled town where they thought they would be safe. Not only did the town take in refugees but they also were forced to take in troops, who plundered the town’s resources.

To make matters worse, in 1637, the plague passed over into that walled city, sweeping like wildfire through the overcrowded town. There were four clergy there at that time. One of them (whom we might think of as a district superintendent or regional minister) fled, the other two ministers died of the plague, leaving Rinkart as the only minister in the entire town to provide not only pastoral care but also medical care to the sick and bury the dead. It is said that he might have officiated at as many as 50 funerals in a day. As the plague progressed people had to be buried in mass graves. 8,000 people died in Eilenburg. One of those was Martin Rinkart’s own beloved wife. And if this pandemic were not bad enough, it was followed by a severe famine where there was mass starvation.

In the midst of this pandemic and famine, Rinkart continued to give everything he had to help alleviate the suffering of those around him, giving away all of his money. And during all of this he was harassed and ridiculed by the city officials. Did Rinkart in the midst of Eilenburg’s pandemic, famine, economic unrest, and war give in to hopelessness and despair or did he still find ways to follow the Apostle Paul’s admonition to:

16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)?

Rinkart indeed prayed without ceasing and gave thanks to God in all circumstances. In the midst of this catastrophic pandemic in which he had lost his wife, some of his children, parishioners, and 8,000 other souls, when the Thirty Years' War was waging, and people were so hungry that there would be fights in the street over a single cat or crow to eat, he penned the words to one of the most powerful and hope-filled hymns of praise of all times that we sing on Thanksgiving: "*Now Thank We All Our God.*"

During this time when our nation is faced with rising deaths from a rapidly spreading pandemic, an economic crisis, racial unrest, and growing divisions in which we point our fingers and declare others "unclean," I end my message today on this Sunday before Thanksgiving by reciting the words to Rinkart's magnificent hymn as my closing prayer:

*Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done, in Whom this world rejoices;
Who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.*

*Oh, may this bounteous God through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us in His grace, and guide us when perplexed;
And guard us through all ills in this world, till the next!*

*All praise and thanks to God the Father now be given,
The Son, and Him Who reigns with Them in highest Heaven—
The one eternal God, Whom earth and Heav'n adore;
For thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore.*

WORDS: Martin Rinkart, 1636; tr. Catherine Winkworth, 1858, alt

MUSIC: Johann Crüger, 1647; harm. Felix Mendelssohn, 1840.

During this Thanksgiving week, no matter our circumstances, may we thank our bounteous God with heart and hands and voices. In Jesus' name. Amen!

NOTE: Rinkart based the first verse of this hymn on the benediction from Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) 50:22-24.