

Thanksgiving Eve  
November 25, 2020  
Dr. Wade P. Hinkle  
Episcopal Church of the Holy Cross, Dunn Loring, VA

*Luke 17: 11-19*

## **Give Thanks**

Good evening, and welcome to the Thanksgiving Eve streaming service of the Episcopal Church of the Holy Cross in Dunn Loring, Virginia.

You may have learned in school that Abraham Lincoln was the first American president to call for a day of Thanksgiving as a national observance. Not true. Lincoln established the continuing tradition of an annual observance.<sup>1</sup> But George Washington was the president who first proclaimed a national day of Thanksgiving.

Washington wrote in his proclamation that, “[I]t is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and to humbly implore his protection and favor....”<sup>2</sup>

But, as I said, the idea of an annual national observance took hold beginning in 1863, and by tradition Thanksgiving was celebrated on the last Thursday in November. But no law specified that. The President had to set the date each year by proclamation.

Although initially intended as a national day of prayer, over the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>, Thanksgiving became more and more secularized. Heading into the 1930s, about the only remaining link to the idea of a national day of thanksgiving and prayer was the strong cultural taboo against advertising for the Christmas shopping season before Thanksgiving.<sup>3</sup>

Yes, I know, how quaint.

But in 1939, the last Thursday in November was going to fall on November 30. America was still only slowly emerging from the Depression. So, Franklin Roosevelt, in an attempt to boost

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Lincoln, Proclamation of Thanksgiving, Presidential Proclamation 106, October 3, 1863, in Roy P. Basler et al., editors, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (Springfield, IL: Abraham Lincoln Association, 1953), accessed at <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/thanks.htm>, November 23, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> George Washington, Thanksgiving Proclamation, October 3, 1789, *The Papers of George Washington*, Presidential Series, vol. 4, *8 September 1789–15 January 1790*, ed. Dorothy Twohig (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993, pp. 131–132) accessed at *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-04-02-0091>, November 21, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> You can read more about the history of Thanksgiving and its increasing secularization in a new book by Denise Kiernan, *We Gather Together: A Nation Divided, a President in Turmoil, and a Historic Campaign to Embrace Gratitude and Grace* (New York: Dutton, 2020).

the economy by lengthening the Christmas shopping season, announced that Thanksgiving would now happen one week earlier.<sup>4</sup>

And there was national outrage. Mostly because, as numerous newspaper editorials noted, Americans felt the president had fundamentally misunderstood the true purpose of Thanksgiving, which was to celebrate the end of the college football season. The Associated Press said Roosevelt's decision was as bad as "a hot halfback running the wrong way." And one college coach was quoted as saying "We'll vote the Republican ticket if he interferes with our football."<sup>5</sup>

All in all, pretty depressing evidence that even 80 years ago, Americans had plainly lost sight of the need to pause periodically and thank God for the benefits God sends us and ask for protection and guidance in the future.

As today's Gospel reading from Luke makes clear, being clueless about the need to give thanks and why that is important is not a new thing. You could not ask for a cleaner example in Scripture than the story of Jesus and the ten lepers.

As you just heard, the story takes place near Samaria while Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. Midway between Samaria and Galilee, he encounters a group of lepers, who, in accordance with Jewish law, are living as outcasts outside the villages.<sup>6</sup> They plead with Jesus to heal them. Jesus sends them to the priests, and all are indeed made clean. But only one, a Samaritan, returns to thank Jesus.

Jesus was flabbergasted. Or, if Jennifer Santley is listening, Jesus was "gobsmacked." Hi, Jennifer.

Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"<sup>7</sup>

What a monumental display of ingratitude. And how ironic that the one out of the ten who does return to Jesus and give thanks was the Samaritan. The outcast among the outcasts. Maybe the other nine, the Jews, considered that their recovery was a matter of course, given their status as members of God's chosen people. Maybe they were simply so joyous in regaining health and being able to hurry to rejoin their families that they simply forgot.

Indisputably, it has been hard through all of history for humans to understand and respond to God's call to relationship and to use that as the basis for living as God intends.

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<sup>4</sup> "The Year We Had Two Thanksgivings," Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, accessed at <http://docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/thanksg.html>, November 19, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Melanie Kirkpatrick, "Happy Franksgiving: How FDR tried and failed to change a national holiday," *Wall Street Journal*, November 24, 2009, accessed at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704888404574548082613991744>, November 19, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Donald G. Miller, *The Layman's Bible Commentary*, Volume 18, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Richmond, VA: John Know Press, 1959), pp. 125-126.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 17:17.

It took years for my mother to teach me to write thank-you notes for Christmas and birthday gifts. What finally helped was my mother telling me that she had found a box *her* mother kept in her apartment with all the thank-you notes she had received from her grandchildren. With few from me. Finally, I realized that my practice, or non-practice, of thanksgiving affected others.

The habit to give thanks has carried over into adulthood. Twenty-five years ago, when my house burned down, the first thing I did the next day was to write thank-you notes to the firefighters who worked so hard to contain the blaze.

But even today, when I am rushed or tired, I can forget to give thanks.

I think that is true for most of us. But when you think about what 2020 has been like, especially in regard to the covid virus, it has never been more important to recognize the need for thanksgiving.

In Luke, the lepers beg Jesus directly. They are actually begging God almighty in person, though they do not know that, because standing before them, Jesus looks entirely human. Which he is, in addition to entirely God.

Jesus responds to their prayers. He says to the Samaritan, “[Y]our faith has made you well.” But in a sense, even though the other nine acted with ingratitude later, their faith made them well also. They were made clean through the power of prayer.

I know we are all praying for good health now for ourselves, and our families, and our communities. We’ve been doing so earnestly and collectively here at Holy Cross since the pandemic began. I wonder, though, if we are fully recognizing the need to give thanks for the fact that, terrible though the pandemic has been, many of us have come through this so far safely.

Yes, I’m sure we give thanks to God in our prayers. But prayer is not the only way we meet God today. Remember the wonderful poem by St. Teresa of Avila that we sing as a hymn. It begins: “Christ has no body now but yours...”<sup>8</sup> Now reword it slightly so it is directed outwardly rather than inwardly. It might then read something like:

Christ has no body now but ours  
 No hands no feet on earth but ours  
 Ours are the eyes with which he looks with  
 Compassion on his world  
 Ours are the feet with which he walks to do good  
 Ours are the hands with which he blesses all the world

Think about that. Who are you *really* meeting when you meet a frontline worker at a hospital or a testing site? Who are you really meeting when you meet the people who are keeping essential services operating or working hard to keep schools in session?

And, perhaps most importantly, who are you really meeting when you meet your neighbors and others who are helping to protect you as well as themselves by socially distancing, avoiding large gatherings, staying home as much as possible. And, above all, wearing masks.

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<sup>8</sup> The text of the hymn, which is slightly different than the prayer, can be found at the Divine Hymns website, accessed at <http://www.divinehymns.com/lyrics/christ-has-no-body-now-but-yours-song-lyrics/>, on November 21, 2020.

Until we get widely available vaccines, we are dependent upon everyone around us to help us maintain our health and care for us if we fall ill. We are asking God for help, and God is sending it. We need to remember to give thanks for it.

One final point about today's reading. Why is the author of Luke telling us the story of the Samaritan who returned to give thanks? Isn't it a miracle enough that Jesus cured the lepers?

To me, the reason we are told the story is so that we have evidence of the power of faith and thanksgiving combined. And how important it is to combine faith and thanksgiving in our daily lives.

Because the example carries forward. In some parts of the country, there is strong resistance to covid prevention measures. So, the next time someone asks you, why you are wearing a mask, answer "Because God asked me to help protect you and your family like others are protecting mine."

So, best wishes for a safe holiday for you and your family. This is the last sermon of this church year. Sunday, we will be the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new church year.

And, equally important, the first appearance of our new priest-in-charge, Kelly.

Amen.