A Sermon for DaySpring

On Covenant Day

By Eric Howell

*“The Heart of Worship”*

October 13, 2019

Luke 17.11-19

When we hear the story from the Gospel of Luke of the Samaritan leper who returns to Jesus to give him thanks, we see the act of a single man revealing the heart of Christian faith: gratitude at the feet of Jesus. It’s what we all need in good times and hard times.

One day Jesus meets 10 lepers. Instead of calling out the prescribed warning: ‘unclean. We are unclean’, the 10 lepers go off script. Instead, they say, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” and he does. He tells them to go to the priests, which is what you’re supposed to do if you’re a leper cured of leprosy in order to get the inspector’s approval that you’re clean and welcomed back into society. We’re told nothing of how they feel about this instruction, but away they go, and as they go, they are miraculously made clean. We don’t hear another word from nine of them, but one of them returns to Jesus and falls down on his face at Jesus feet and thanks him.

This act of thanksgiving to someone who changed your life so completely seems so generically appropriate that it could be easy to overlook and just focus on why those others didn’t come back and do the same. Jesus even asks, “Were not 10 cleansed? Where are the other nine?” They were not found, only the one prostrate at his feet. “Arise, go your way,” Jesus told him. “Your faith has made you well.”

Gratitude is manifestly central to Christian life yet in the four gospels, for all the miracles and wonderful things that happen to so many people, there are only three people who give thanks. Only three. People give praise or give witness or are amazed, but only three give thanks. And the first is dubious, a pharisee who says to God, “Thank you that I’m not like those other people.” So, I’m not sure that even counts. The second is Jesus who gives thanks when he breaks bread to feed the crowds on the hillside and to feed his disciples at the last supper: *He took the bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples.* The third is this Samaritan leper, cleansed, healed, made whole, who spontaneously returns to Jesus and falls on his face at his feet. This picture right here is the heart of everything for us.

In an era when the protestant reformation sparked all kinds of hotly debated liturgical and ecclesial reforms, Martin Luther was asked to cut to the chase. “What is the nature of true worship?” he was asked. His answer,” the 10th leper turning back to Jesus. That is the nature of true worship.”

Rowan Williams says of gratitude, “When we say thank you to God, we connect our own experience with God as Giver. We say that what has happened to us is somehow rooted in the gift of God. When Jesus gives thanks at the last supper before the breaking and spilling, before the wounds and the blood, it is as if he is connecting the darkest places of human experience with God the Giver; as if he is saying that even in these dark places God continues to give, and therefore we must continue to give thanks.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In everything, the heart of worship is the heart of gratitude.

On our covenant day we have much for which to give thanks. In this past year, we have participated in God’s holy work within us and among us. Friendships have been born, babies have been dedicated to the Lord, couples joined in marriage, new Christians baptized, prayers lifted, children taught about Jesus. We have had our homes broken open to strangers who become brothers and sisters. We have prepared and shared meals. So many of us have been part of the quiet work of the church: cleaning, weeding, mowing, preparing lessons, and on and on. Our work is our prayer, our prayer is our work. It’s been so very good.

And we have seen the darkness too, we’ve buried saints, and wondered if broken hearts would heal; families have suffered through trials. In joy and in agony, we’ve fallen time and again at the feet of Jesus. In the light and in the darkness, we give thanks to God. And we’ve learned to say: blessed be the name of the Lord. When the sun's shining down on me, when the world's 'all as it should be', blessed be the name of the Lord. And on the road marked with suffering though there's pain in the offering Blessed be the name of the Lord. (*Blessed Be Your Name,* Matt Redmond)

The Samaritan’s witness shows that we give praise to God via our grateful submission to Jesus as master and lord. And the fitting location to offer such praise is the feet of Jesus. We come to his feet as those who have been healed and those who are being healed.

The thanksgivings of Jesus and the Samaritan’s spontaneous act of worship at the feet of Jesus became central for Christians from earliest days. The New Testament Greek word for giving thanks in these stories took root among Christians and became the earliest and most widespread name for what we do when we come to the Lord’s Table for Communion: *eucharisteo*. Eucharist. It means thanksgiving. At the Table of the Lord, we bring with us all that is within us: giving thanks, in our joy and sorrow, our fears and hope, our doubts and faith, our sense of being lost and our most profound sense of belonging. (adapted from Williams, 49)

When we come as guests at God’s table “the Church becomes what it is meant to be—a community of strangers who have become guests together and are listening together to the invitation of God.” (Williams, 58)

The Church at Table is the preeminent sign of our need for Jesus, his abundant mercy, our collective sharing in the goodness of God, and our *eucharisteo*—our thanksgiving. Like a lot of people, I used to think eucharist or communion was a kind of afterthought of the worshiping life of a church. Growing up it was surprising to come to church to see the little cups and wafers on the table in the front. I guess we had communion once/quarter, 4 times a year like a lot of churches.

My attitude has changed. For the last several years I’ve been celebrating communion just about every Wednesday evening in our Chapel with whoever is able to come for Evening prayer. After a dark season in my own life, I knew I needed the Table. Not because I was feeling particularly thankful every week, but because I needed to simply be a participant in something holy that itself could possibly work God’s healing and saving in the lives of those who come humbly. If the feet of Jesus is where our faith makes us well, the Table is as close to the feet of Jesus I could find to bring as much faith as I had to the One who makes us whole. So, I just started celebrating every Wednesday with whoever was here to join me.

Usually it’s a pretty small group, but that has never mattered. Every week, I stand at the table and break the bread and lift high the cup. And it’s never gotten old. It’s never gotten stale, even though I admit the bread has been a couple of times. It’s never been taken for granted. I was once told that you should only have communion just a few times a year or it won’t be special. I guess I used to believe that, but I don’t anymore. It’s even more meaningful to me now, a return to the sacred simplicity of my need for grace, my gratitude for the gift of grace that God gives freely and abundantly, and for my brothers and sisters whom I serve and from whom the bread of life is placed in my open hands every week.

Breaking the bread and eating it each week has helped me love God and moved my prayers from just thoughts in my head and feelings in my heart into my whole body, and into my hands and feet with which in the name of Jesus I can serve the world. At the Table, at the feet of Jesus, the living, incarnate word becomes part of us and we become part of his life by the Holy Spirit.

As we renew our covenant together today, the spirituality animating this congregation is as it has always been, at heart a eucharistic spirituality. We come in celebration, with thanksgiving for the goodness of God made known in Jesus and in the power of worship to renew and transform us. We come in contemplation, with a prayer of reflection in God’s holy presence, as we are made more aware of God’s faithfulness and love. We come renewed in mission to share in the life and ministry of the Lord.

While perhaps we cannot, like the leper, fall at the feet of our incarnate Lord to give *eucharisteo*, we can come to the Eucharist Table, where Jesus promised to meet us as he broke the bread saying, “this is my body” and held the cup saying, ‘this is the cup of the new covenant in my blood.’ This is where we remember if everything else in our lives causes us forget. We come to the feet of Jesus and his hands and his words and his heart, and then we remember who we are. We are made the Body of Christ. You are loved. You are holy. You are a sinner saved by grace. You are forgiven. You can learn to forgive. You belong. You are a person for whom we give thanks. And you can learn to live with heartfelt gratitude renewed at the table of grace. I don’t know about you but I need that reminder a lot more, more and more as I long to hear those words again and again, “Arise, your faith has made you well.”

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1. Modified from *Being Christian: Baptistm, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer,* p48. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)