

November 22, 2017
Thanksgiving Eve
Psalm 136:1-4, 16, 25-26; Philippians 4:4-9; Luke 17:11-19
Giving Thanks
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Fellow Ministers of the Gospel of Jesus the Christ.
Grace to you and peace for God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit
whose steadfast love endures forever. Amen

This combination of texts seems obvious for our Thanksgiving celebration tonight.

Give thanks to the Lord. God's steadfast love endures forever. Rejoice always! And again I say rejoice!

Your faith has made you well! Yet I stand here with you wondering what we have to give thanks for, really. Listening to the news we are more likely to be sad, afraid, angry or uncertain. There are nuclear threats from North Korea. There are grieving Christians debating the merits of arming church members. There are men in power being brought down by their past inequities. There are women speaking out, some for the first time against the men in power. There seems to be more fear than thankfulness, rejoicing or praise and worship. And here we are in this warm, comfortable, safe place bathed in soft light, familiar songs and words surrounding us,

If we are honest with ourselves and each other, we are more likely thinking about our feast preparations for tomorrow, turkey and stuffing, mashed potatoes and yams, pie and whipped cream, than we are thinking about praising God for enduring and steadfast love.

It is here, tonight that we meet Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, on his way to the cross. He is outdoors, encountering real people with real diseases.

This year many of us have spent hours sitting at the bedsides of our loved ones, waiting to hear diagnoses as we watched our parent, child, sister, brother, grandmother draw closer to death. My own hours spent waiting with my husband for tests and test results gave me time to reflect on the pain, fear and fragility of our humanness.

Each time we waited for yet another test, we were surprised at the question posed by the triage or intake receptionist:
"Have you recently been to any of these countries . . ." specifically countries in West Africa.

Modern-day lepers are not so different from the lepers Jesus encountered on the road between Samaria and Galilee. Those lepers were forbidden from coming near to others, they could only call out to Jesus from a distance. And Jesus sees them, really sees them and he hears them and he responds to them. But Jesus responds in an odd way. He sends them on their way, telling them to go present themselves to the priests. That's it?

Picture this, what if your oncologist tells you to "go and show yourself to your pastor". How would that be helpful?

But the lepers went as they were commanded to go and as they went, the text tells us, they were made clean. A miracle! They were made clean. How did that happen and how did they respond? All they were required to do was be certified cleansed by a priest. They may have told others. "Look, that teacher known as Jesus told us to go to the priests and we are now clean". They could return to their normal lives as part of society. I wonder if they even connected their encounter with Jesus to their miraculous healing.

But one of them who “saw” that he was now clean, returned to Jesus praising God with a loud voice. He let people know that he had been healed. He threw himself on the ground and thanked Jesus. Threw himself on the ground at Jesus’ feet!

“Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice” says the apostle Paul. In everything!

Everything. Not just the good days, not just the miracle days, but in EVERYTHING rejoice! In sickness? In unemployment? In aging? In the face of death, violence, war, earthquakes, hurricanes? Yes! In EVERYTHING we are to let our needs be made known to God, as the lepers did by calling out to Jesus, and God promises to guard our hearts and minds with the peace which passes all human understanding.

We are to think on all that is true and pure, commendable and pleasing, honorable and worthy of praise. We are to stand firm in the way of Jesus. Well isn't that a bit unrealistic? Are we never to mourn, or grieve, or show anger at injustice? I don't think that's the message from Paul, or the Psalmist. I think the message tonight is not about silver-lined clouds, I think the message is about God's steadfast and faithful presence. God remains with us through the chaos. God walks beside us, weeps with us and rejoices with us

This is the truth. This is what we can count on. This is what fills us with joy even at the most sorrowful seasons of life. God was faithful to the Israelites, God was faithful to the 10 lepers, and God was faithful to early settlers in all countries.

It was not always easy or pretty, it was not always pain free but God was faithful.

And God will be faithful today in Sutherland Springs, TX, in churches that are shrinking, to people who are hurt and lonely and sick and grieving and dying. It won't always be pretty, it won't always be easy, but God IS faithful.

We give thanks not because life is good or perfect or easy, we give thanks not because we have all that we need, We give thanks not because we are “blessed” with friends and family and food. We give thanks because God's steadfast mercy endures forever.

Thanks be to God.