

Thanksgiving, 2008

Text: Luke 17:11-19

Title: Thanksgiving in No-man's Land

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Oak Lawn is a bit of a no-man's land. We're not really in Chicago, but we're not really in the suburbs either. Many of you grew up in the city. When you moved here you were living on the edge of civilization. But now you're in the city, but you're not. You live in Chicago, but you don't. For most of you, your kids have moved on, but you're still here, living in no-man's land. This is not where your parents are from, but not where your kids have settled, either.

We're also in a no-man's land in terms of time. Last Sunday the church year ended. We celebrated the fulfillment and Jesus' return to judge the living and the dead. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent, the new church year looking forward to Christmas and Bethlehem. But here on Wednesday night, we're between things, between the end and the beginning.

As Christians we live in this no-man's land. We're not to get too attached to things here on earth, but we're not in heaven yet. We live between Jesus' first and second comings.

As forgiven sinners we live in a no-man's land. We're saved. We're forgiven. We belong to the Lord. And yet we keep sinning, we keep failing, we keep messing things up. We're in the no-man's land between saint and sinner.

We feel this tension in our lives. We know that things aren't right here, but we don't know when the Lord will return to make things right. We're living in a no man's land.

The good news is that Jesus comes to this no-man's land. Our gospel lesson begins with Jesus traveling the border of Galilee and Samaria. Galilee was Jesus' home. Galilee is where He grew up- in Nazareth where His dad ran the local carpenter's shop. Galilee is where Jesus went to school and to synagogue. He preached in Capernaum, He went fishing on the Sea of Galilee, He healed and taught and cast out demons here. Galilee was home.

But Jesus on His way to Jerusalem. He's going there to die. But He's not there yet. He's still on the road. He knows what's coming. He knows how it will end, but He's not there yet. And so Jesus comes to this no-man's land. On the border. Between Galilee and Samaria. On the road to Jerusalem. Jesus comes to a village that has no name.

And when Jesus comes to this village in no-man's land, on the border between Galilee and Samaria, He sees ten lepers standing far-off. There's a reason for this. They're unclean. They're contagious. They are the outcasts. If anyone truly lived in no-man's land, it was the leper. The leper was outside of the community, cut off from friends and family. The leper felt

abandoned, living between life and death. The only company was the other lepers, whom you would watch slowly waste away and die, knowing that some day the same fate would befall you.

Our sin causes the same separation between us and God. We are unclean. We are outcasts. We live in this no-man's land. Our sin cuts us off from friends and family. Nasty fights. Divorce. Separation. And as we look around us watch our neighbors waste away and die. Families falling apart. People fighting over silly, unimportant things. And we pray that one day the same fate doesn't befall us.

Yet into this no-man's land comes Jesus. He's on His way to Jerusalem to die. He already has a full plate. But He stops for you. Our cries have reached his ears. "Lord, have mercy on us." We plead and we beg. Our tears stream down our face. Won't someone have pity on us? Won't someone help us?

We pray for peace- the peace of the whole world and the well-being of the church of God. We pray for the unity of all and for our salvation. We pray for this holy house and for all who offer here their worship and praise. We pray for peace in our community, for young people to be safe from drugs and violence. We pray for peace in our families. We pray for peace throughout the world- that our sons and daughters away at war would finally come home. For all these things we cry, Lord, have mercy.

And the Lord does. It begins with the Lord seeing us. Our text says, "When He saw them..." So often when we see someone begging or in need, we look away. We can't bear to see them, and we think that if we look away, we won't feel as guilty. Not so with the Lord. He doesn't look away. He doesn't hide His face. No, He sees you in all your need. He knows your problems and your pain. He doesn't avoid you, but He truly sees you.

And then the Lord speaks. He does it all through His word. "Go, show yourselves to the priests." His words cleanse you and make you clean and whole. His words bring you back into the community and make you acceptable to God. "I forgive you all your sins in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." These words do all the work.

Now there are two reactions to those who hear God's word. Nine out of ten lepers leave and never come back. They are healed and continue leading their lives. They've got what they needed from Jesus and so off they go.

Just as in Jesus' day, many of us receive the Lord's blessings and never look back. They go about their business and don't give Jesus a second thought. There are those who are baptized and those who are confirmed who head off on their way and don't give Jesus a second thought. These are those who have more than they need and are more concerned tomorrow with parades and turkey and football than those around them who are hungry, homeless and unemployed.

It's painful, and you can hear the frustration in Jesus' voice, "Were not ten healed? Where are the other nine." It's painful for us, too, when the other nine are people we know, people from our congregation and even our own families, people who have received the Lord's blessings, but

do not give thanks for all that He has given them. We look around us Sunday after Sunday and say, “Where are the other nine?”

And yet there is the one who returns. And He is the only one. In all of the gospels- Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, only one person actually thanks Jesus for anything. Of all the people Jesus heals, of all the people whom Jesus sets free from demonic possession, of all the people Jesus feeds, of all the people Jesus teaches, only one person in any gospel ever says thank you to Jesus.

And it’s not just a card in the mail two weeks later. Look at how the thanksgiving overflows from the man’s heart. He sees that He is healed, and He returns to Jesus, with a loud voice He praises God. So often we mumble our Amens and we whisper our songs of praise. But not this one. He sings at the top of his voice. He’s not embarrassed or ashamed. He doesn’t care what other people think. He doesn’t care if he’s a little off key. His life has been changed. He’s a new creation. And so with a loud voice He gives glory to God.

When He finally reaches Jesus, He falls face down at Jesus’ feet. This is an act of worship. He knows that only God could do such a thing. God is no longer to be found in Jerusalem at the temple where the priests were serving. God is now dwelling among man. God has now come here to this no-man’s land to change his life. There is no need to go to Jerusalem and see the priests. God is here and this is the new place to worship.

When he falls at Jesus’ feet, he gives thanks to Jesus. The Greek word for thanksgiving used here, is eucharistia. A Eucharist is a thanksgiving. In a few moments we will join this Samaritan ex-leper in giving thanks. Together we will pray this prayer of thanksgiving:

“Blessed are you, Lord of heaven and earth, for you have had mercy on us children of men and given your only-begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. We give you thanks for the redemption you have prepared for us through Jesus Christ. Send your Holy Spirit into our hearts that he may establish in us a living faith and prepare us joyfully to remember our Redeemer and receive him who comes to us in his body and blood.”

Every Sunday (when we receive the Lord’s Supper) is a little thanksgiving. Here we receive something better than turkey and gravy, mashed potatoes and stuffing, sweet potatoes and pumpkin pie. In this meal you receive the body and blood of Christ, given and shed for you. There’s no finer meal. There’s no great feast than what we receive here, together, right now.

And after the Thanksgiving feast, the Lord sends us on our way. Jesus said to the leper, “Arise, go, for your faith has made you well.” At the end of the service, the Lord sends you out on your way with His blessing, knowing that you have been given faith, and that faith has saved you.

And so here, in Luke 17, we have the entire divine service, from Kyrie, our cry, “Lord have mercy,” to the Lord’s words of healing, to our response of praise, to the great thanksgiving of the Eucharist to the benediction and the sending on our way. Our entire Divine Service is here. Our entire life as Christians is here.

Our Lord came to that no-man's land between Galilee and Samaria and celebrated thanksgiving with the Leper. Our Lord now comes to the no-man's land of Oak Lawn to celebrate thanksgiving with us.

Thanks be to God.