

The Eucharistic Life

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Ancient Witness: Luke 17:11-19

Winston Churchill once told a story about how once there was a sailor who dove into the icy waters of Plymouth Harbor to rescue a small boy from drowning. A few days later this brave hero met the boy with his mother on the streets of the city. The youngster nudged his mother who remembered having seen this guy before, but unsure as to where. “Are you the man who pulled my little boy out of the water?” The sailor grinned, saluted and answered, “Yes, ma’am.” He began to think about how he was going to respond to her thanks when she quickly snapped at him, “Then where’s his cap?”

We can go through life with this attitude, “Then where’s his cap?” focusing on our troubles, our shortcomings, our failures. Even though the most precious gift has been given to us, we can still be utterly blind to it. As we approach the national holiday this week, I want to reflect on what it means to give thanks today.

My friends, Robin Meyers, recently said,

As a lifelong Congregationalist, I was asked to accept the myth of the first Thanksgiving as gospel, but I suspected that like so much of our revisionist history, created to make white people feel better, the tale of that first happy meal was about as accurate as the Hollywood portraits of Jesus hanging in so many church vestibules... In this year of suffering and racial justice protests, let us never forget that we have been about the business of creating myths that make us feel better about genocide for a long, long time.

So how do we talk about Thanksgiving at a time such as this?

We are in the midst of a pandemic. Over a quarter of a million people have died in the U.S.—a conservative estimate. It is likely quite more than that. And it’s going to get much, much worse. Last week we set a new record of over 200,000 new cases in one day. Children are depressed and failing academically. Businesses are failing. Families are suffering.

How do we celebrate Thanksgiving in the midst of this?

We have had an election in which over 154 million people voted—over 65% of eligible voters—the highest percentage in 120 years—an amazing feat in the midst of a pandemic. President Elect Biden won the popular vote by more than 6 million votes, and the electoral college margin was 306 to 232—no even close. And yet...

And yet, the outgoing President is working to subvert the democratic process of our nation. Day after day, he has repeated the baseless lie that the election was rigged and fraudulent against him. Newspapers, television networks and social media platforms have all countered this false story by

saying that there is no evidence to support this claim. The President directed the Justice Department to investigate widespread voter fraud with no evidence, and many of the department's top lawyers resigned in protest. Even the nation's head of cyber security refuted this lie, and so the President fired him. The President's legal team has brought lawsuit after lawsuit against several states, in attempts to disqualify legally cast votes. And he lost each case. And now, he is trying to pressure election boards and officials not to certify the results. The goal now is to get state legislatures controlled by Republicans to overturn the will of the people and cast the electoral votes for him.

Make no mistake. This is an authoritarian takeover attempt—a coup. Folks, this is not normal. It is unprecedented. It is outrageous. And it is dangerous, threatening the very foundation of our democracy. And so far, the entire Republican party has been complicit in either their outright support or their silence.

At a time like this, how can we talk about Thanksgiving?

In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, he wrote, "give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1 Thess. 5:18) Now, this is kind of a strange command, isn't it? I mean, isn't thanksgiving something that is either there or it isn't? Doesn't being thankful come from the heart? Spontaneously? Yet the gospel message is very clear that gratitude is the very centerpiece of the Christian life.

If there is anything at all we need to know, it is this: Viewing the world through thankful eyes unites us with God. It saves us. Salvation itself comes through thankfulness.

This morning we read Luke's parable about the healing of the ten lepers. Jesus met the lepers on the way to Jerusalem. "Go and show yourselves to the priests," he told them. (Do not hide yourselves; do not mope around; do not wait for them to come to you.) So as they did what Jesus said, they were healed.

"Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks." (Luke 17:15-16)

Then Jesus asks one of the most poignant questions in the Scriptures when he said, "Where are the other nine?" It is tragic, but there are many who will experience healing, yet who do not respond with thanks or gratitude. Jesus then says to the one remaining man, "Rise and go on your way; your faith has made you whole," or better, "your faith has saved you."

Now to understand this parable, it is important that the words for healing and salvation are the same word in the Greek language. So to be healed in these parables is much more than to be made better physically, it is to have a salvation experience.

And the tragedy in this parable is that the nine other lepers didn't see it this way. That is, the nine others were healed, but they missed being whole or being saved. What is decisive in this story is not the healing, but the seeing. "When he saw... he turned back... giving Jesus thanks." "Seeing" enables human beings to turn back and give thanks. And it is in this act of thanksgiving that we find salvation.

This parable is a call to a faith which will save us and make us whole. It is a call to recognize what God has done, and in so doing, to be grateful. You could say that viewing the world through thankful eyes unites us with God and saves us.

This parable is also about those who taught healing, but not salvation. It is about those who took the benefits of God for granted, without gratitude. It is about seeing just the temporary and not the eternal qualities of life. Sometimes we can be thankful by moving from blessing to blessing, like hopping from island to island. “Thank you for this house, my family, my health...” But these good things are just that—*islands*—without the ability to “see” and to “recognize” more than just that. The blessings are connected to something much greater.

We need to be reminded what true thankfulness is, a thankfulness beyond the surface offered by a cultural national holiday, a thankfulness not just for material things but for the blessings of a constant relationship with God, a thankfulness which exists in all circumstances, a thankfulness not of hindsight but of a more profound foresight, a thankfulness that is the result of a certain kind of seeing, a thanksgiving which saves us.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, that great preacher at the liberal Riverside Church in New York City, told a story of when he was a boy his mother had him go out and pick a quart of raspberries. And he hated it; he resented it. But when he did it something came over him. And he decided to surprise his family and picked two quarts instead. What happened was that a new attitude of gratitude—appreciation of his family—changed everything. And what once was a chore now became a joy. This is what true thankfulness does. It changes everything. And we find a joy which is everlasting.

As David Steindal-Rast said, “It is not joy that makes us grateful; it is gratitude that makes us joyful.”

The Greek word, “eucharistos,” means “thankful.” And eucharist was originally “to give thanks for food.” It referred to the way that the Jewish people, before eating or drinking anything, would recount what God has done and thank God. And it was this kind of prayer that Jesus would have said at the Last Supper.

And by the second century the Christians began to use this term to remember Jesus—and so they were thanking God not just for bread, but for what they called the Bread of Life.

The core element of the church and the Christian life is this act of remembrance, of “turning back” and seeing and giving thanks. The holy sacrament embodies the thankful existence, the eucharistic life, which is what it means to be in communion or at one with God.

The great spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen, wrote that the eucharistic life is when we move from resentment to gratitude. (*With Burning Hearts*)

The older we become, the greater is the temptation to say: “Life has cheated me...”

Resentment is one of the most destructive forces in our lives. It is cold anger that has settled into the center of our being and hardened our hearts. Resentment can become a way of life that so pervades our words and actions that we no longer recognize it as such.

Nouwen reflects that he has many corners in his own heart that hide his resentment, and he wonders if he really wants to be without them. And he says that resentment is one of the most paralyzing aspects of the Christian community. He writes:

Mourning our losses is the first step away from resentment toward gratitude. The tears of our grief can soften our heartened hearts and open us to the possibility to say “thanks.”

Gratitude is a choice, and it “needs to be discovered and to be lived with great inner attentiveness.”

In our daily lives we have countless opportunities to be grateful instead of resentful... there is always a voice... that asks us to have a completely new look at our lives, a look not from below, where we count our losses, but from above...

Eucharist—thanksgiving—in the end, comes from above. It is a gift that we cannot fabricate for ourselves. It is to be received...

Someone once said that the way to this thankful life is like driving a car. When you are driving, you need to keep your eyes on the road (especially in the most dangerous stretches)—not to be distracted, not looking at people, etc. Living the thankful life, the eucharistic life is keeping your eyes on the Sacred Presence. It is to live with an awareness that we are never alone, that we are one and in communion with the Divine, and that our little lives are part of the great and mysterious life of God.

The great mystic, Meister Eckhart, famously said,

If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is “thank you,” that would be sufficient.

This is the eucharistic life, the life in which every moment is an opportunity for saying “thank you” for a gift that we already and always have.