

# Thanksgiving Day

## THE GIVER IS THE GIFT

Luke 17:11-19

## Thanksgiving Day

## Analysis by Ron Starenko

11On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. 12As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, 13they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" 14When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priest." And as they went, they were made clean. 15Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. 16He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. 17Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? 18 Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" 19Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

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## DIAGNOSIS: When the Giver is Less Than the Gift

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Chasing Idols*

What we call a National Day of Thanksgiving, originally a meal prepared by God-fearing Pilgrims, has devolved into a sub-culture celebration of excess, known as Turkey Day. What was intended to be an attempt to honor the sacred as praise to God has become a tradition of chasing idols, using, disposing, finally being consumed by what we worship, honoring something that is less than God (Exodus 20:4-5), less than the Giver. When

the gift becomes king (John 6:15), we not only abuse the gift, turning it into a right (read also rite), we despise the Giver. Nine of the ten lepers who were healed by Jesus, without praise and thanksgiving to God, worshipped the gift, not the Giver.

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Hooked on Idols***

Ten lepers, suffering from a crippling and disfiguring disease, isolated from society, would have a desperate need, to be sure. We all look for a way out of trouble, reaching for anything that might relieve our pain and get us back to enjoying life again—the pain killer, the surgery, the wind-fall, the break, something to steady us, to confirm that life is worth living. As if the ten were saying, “I don’t deserve this leprosy (or whatever befalls any of us), I have better plans for my life than that. The world is my stage, and I’m entitled to a piece of the action.” And so, the gift, which turns out in our minds and hearts to be more like a prize or a reward, becomes our god, – and we its slave. Seeking it above all else, trusting in it completely, we become junkies, hooked on our idols. The Giver, now completely out of view, we are left only with the “gift,” which in the end can never come through for us, our god too small.

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Taken Down With Our Idols***

“Do not labor for the food that perishes,” Jesus said to those whose bellies were filled by the bread feast (John 6:27). The truth, Jesus is saying, is that by eating what is perishable we remain perishable. Likewise, St. Paul, exhorting the Corinthian congregation “to flee from the worship of idols” (1 Cor. 10:14), warns that eating what is “sacrificed to demons” is to become “partners with demons” (10:20-21), tied to the fate of the idols, the eternal dimension of death, no longer having “the perfect gift...from above...the Father of lights” (1Tim.1:17). The nine who walked away from Jesus, never to return, become the

sobering image of the danger we risk, making the Giver less than the gift. Indeed, a national holiday of thanksgiving is a dangerous thing, perhaps a sign of our undoing. Desiring, having, eating what is less than God, is death, the nine apparently having fallen into the trap. Taking, we are taken; finally taken out.

## **PROGNOSIS: When the Gift and the Giver are One and the Same**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** : *Where the Giver is Present*

The good news is that the Giver nevertheless remains present in what is despised. Such is the cornerstone of our Lutheran heritage, unique to the tradition we have received from the Eastern Church, what Luke affirms in this miracle story where Jesus heals the ten. These despised men come to Jesus for healing, and if he dares to respond to them, their plight becomes his. They have no way to heal themselves, as they cry out, "Son of David, have mercy on us" (v. 13). What they are asking for, though they might not even know it, is the Living God, to change places with them. From the beginning the church has confessed that God has drawn near to us in the humanity of Jesus, who became our sin (2 Cor. 5:21), our sickness, where we are lost from God in our idols; and in the cross God has suffered it all away, the Giver and the gift one and the same. This is the Sacrament, where the Creator is present in our humanity, giving life to sinners. In the case of the lepers, the sacramental blessing is already present in any healing, as in any "miracle" Jesus dies our death, his death becomes our life, the Giver in the gift.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution)** : *When the Giver is Received*

The Samaritan gets it. He comes back, worshipping, giving thanks

at Jesus' feet. There's no attempt here to make him into a theological expert on divine mysteries. Still, he sees that his healing and the Healer are one and the same. Do we not all confess the same faith when we come to the Lord's Table, in the sacramental eating and drinking, receiving the crucified and risen Christ? Are we not, therefore, proclaiming that by receiving the gift we have him, his body in our bodies, for our living, for all that is new today, tomorrow, and forever? Indeed, in this Holy Eucharist, the ultimate act of thanksgiving, we are celebrating our union with God, with one another, and with the whole creation, the gifts and the Giver together.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) :** *When the Receivers Become Givers*

It is a fact of life that from the day we are born we are able to give only what we have received, good or bad. Whatever we receive from another is never just something, it is always Someone, the Giver in the gift, the one in the other. The nine lepers, now healed, did not see the Giver in the gift, so they turn the gift into an idol and go their way, the wrong way, separated from the Giver. The Samaritan, however, "turned back" (v. 15) to Jesus, worshipping the Giver, united with the one who was present in the gift. Now the Samaritan is changed, becoming a giver, giving back not only to Jesus, but to the neighbor in need, that the neighbor might see and receive the Giver in the gift, as we are all "little Christs," said Luther. The nine return to their living as usual, worshipping the gift as though the Giver did not exist. The Samaritan returns to live out the new life he has received, an icon of the Christ, the sign that Jesus is the healer not only of leprosy or any other disorder, but really the healer of the whole creation now in labor pains (Rom. 8:22), where the Creator and the creature are one. On this Thanksgiving Day the Lord's Table is the place where we

celebrate how the Lord of all creation becomes one with us in the bread and the wine shared. Receiving the elements of creation, we are receiving him, becoming one with the Divine Godhead, as we “go on our way” (v. 19), signs of healing and wholeness in our everyday lives, givers of the gift.