

Thursday Theology: “The Ultimate Turkey” and other Thanksgiving Reflections

Co-missioners,

Today is the fourth Thursday in November. For readers who aren't American, we mention that this is Thanksgiving Day in the U.S. It was established as a national observance in 1863 by President Abraham Lincoln. The Civil War was raging at the time; bodies were still being buried at Gettysburg. Lincoln issued his thanksgiving proclamation on October 3, six weeks before traveling to Gettysburg to deliver his famous address at the dedication of its battlefield cemetery.

People with an ear for the Law of God would do well to read this proclamation today. Coming from someone with no formal theological training or any stated convictions about the death and resurrection of Christ, it's a remarkable document. One finds here an intuitive grasp of what Lutherans identify as the Law's two great uses. It keeps the world humming, revealing God's great mercy. It also holds us to account for our sin and wickedness, revealing God's righteous displeasure. How Lincoln found the nerve to face the displeasure while lauding the mercy is a mystery. Too few are the credentialed preachers of 2023 who do either of these well, let alone both at the same time. Hardly any come within miles of matching Lincoln's brilliance as a writer.

Anyway, [here's the link](#). We hope you'll use it. Or, if you're in a rush to get to the dinner table and after that to watch the Detroit Lions display something other than their usual Thanksgiving Day futility, then chew at least on this line:

[“These great things”—(do your own quick inventory of what struck you as astonishingly good in this past year of ongoing national embarrassment)—] “are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.”

Thanks be to God indeed!

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With this we hand you on to our editor for today’s main helping of Thursday Theology. We do so with thanks to God for each and every one of you who supports what we do, rejoicing with us in the ever-unfolding marvel of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

A Thanksgiving Day Homily on the [Episode of the Ten Lepers](#)

by Jerome Burce

Preface

The habit of starting Thanksgiving Day with a trip to church was once a common feature of American Christianity. It’s in deep recession these days among the Lutherans I’m connected to. I insisted on maintaining the tradition during my three and a half decades as a U.S. parish pastor. Thanksgiving Day turnout, always sparse, grew sparser through the years, no matter the fact that the hymns we’re given to sing on Thanksgiving Day are

simply grand. I started hearing of more and more congregations dropping Thanksgiving services altogether. Last Sunday I found this to be the case at the little church I've been going to in retirement.

Comes a guess. Many will be the readers of Thursday Theology who either couldn't find a church to attend today or, having slipped from the habit themselves, didn't bother to look. With this in mind I dug in the barrel for a Thanksgiving homily to share, a Crossings-style reflection on the Word of that God to whom all thanks are due (Luther's Small Catechism, First Article) and whose stupendous action in Christ makes genuine gushing thanks not only possible but inevitable as we "serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness" (SC Second Article).

From that barrel I dug in I pulled out a couple of options, both imperfect. I had two and a half reasons for finally settling on the one I share with you here. First, it deals with the Gospel appointed for today in the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, the one that wraps up this coming Sunday. Second, it features an unusual spin at the P4 level, where one treats of the death of Christ and how this bears on the problem under consideration. As for the half-reason, that's because it was preached in 2017, the last time that Thanksgiving Day fell on today's date, November 23.

I have never had the habit of assigning titles to my sermons. As I groped for one to use here, I shoved tongue in cheek and thought of "The Ultimate Turkey." Those unfamiliar with American English and American habits should know that "turkey" has two meanings. It refers in the first place to the bird that in roasted form produces oohs and aahs of delight around the majority of American Thanksgiving Day tables. Live turkeys elicit none of this praise. They're regarded as stupid. Hence the metaphorical usage by which "turkey" means someone guilty of

doing something inexpressibly dumb—as, say, in giving up his life for people who ignore and despise him.

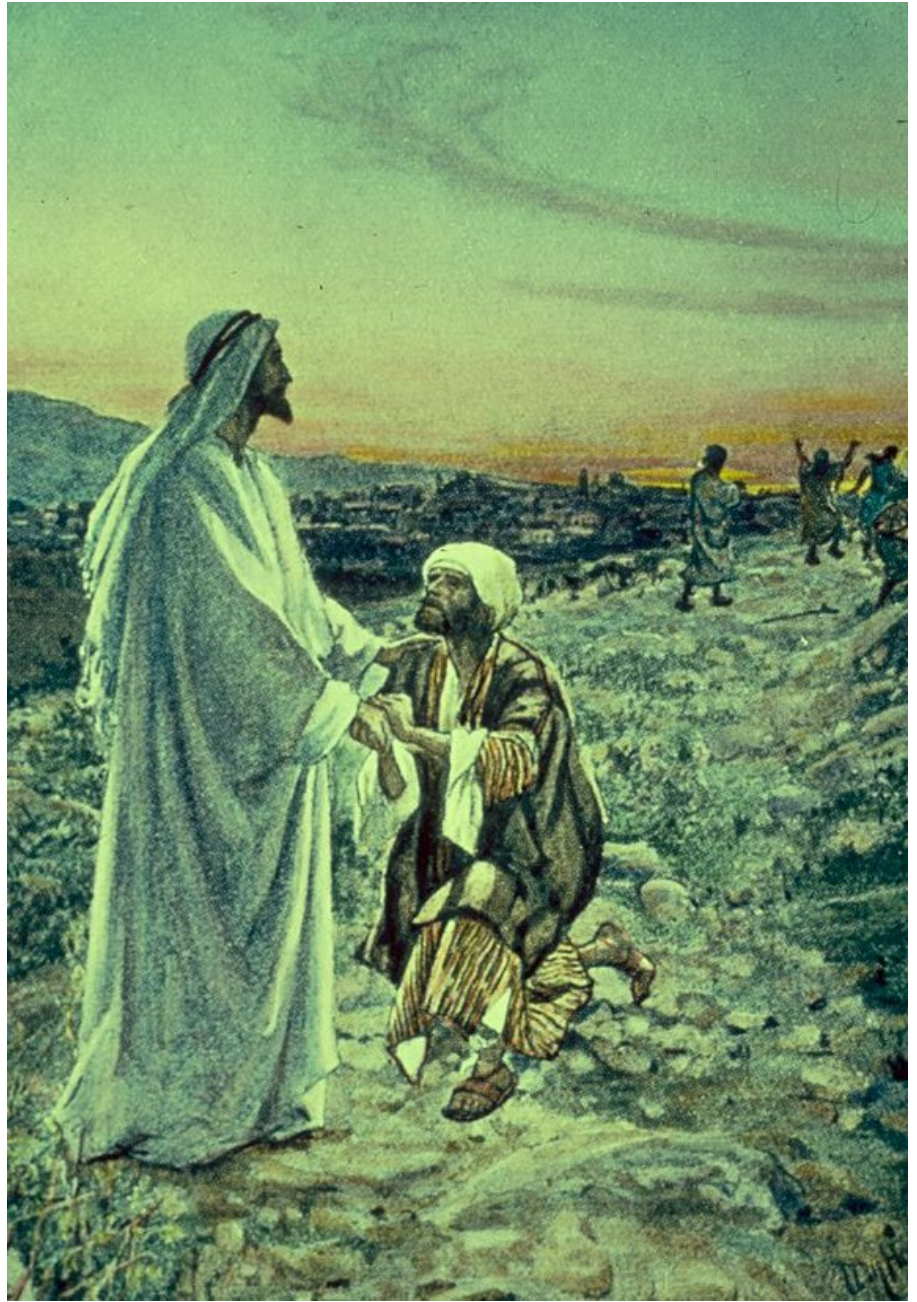
So yes, Christ. Thanks be to God for the Turkey of Turkeys. Such a gift he is for this or any other day! –JB.

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The Homily

After reading Luke 17:11-19, Jesus' encounter with the ten lepers—

In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit.



Jesus, having cleansed ten lepers, is grieved that but one returneth to give thanks, and he a stranger – Hole, William, 1846-1917

[From Wikimedia Commons](#)

So one guy gets it, nine guys don't, and the one who gets it is the one who shouldn't. That much is plain in the story we just heard. And where the Bible's overall take on reality is concerned, this is also fairly common, so common that you've got

to wonder on this day of America's thanksgiving whether the person who winds up putting the biggest smile on the face of Christ our Lord will turn out to be some kind of vaguely Muslim refugee who snuck across the border six months ago and is still in hiding.

Such a thing would not surprise me at all. And when I think about it, it makes sense too. After all, a guy like this—the Samaritan of our day; the leprous Samaritan, as some would have it—such a guy will likely not be sitting at a table this afternoon feeling entitled to the bounty of the land he suddenly finds himself in. But this, of course, will put him in exactly the position to render up the kind of thanks that God keeps looking for in every human heart, beginning with my heart and your hearts too.

If only you and I could somehow get past this entitlement thing we're so addicted to. We have got to get past it. It kills thanks. It chokes praise. It insults God.

Luke doesn't say why nine of the lepers failed to do that thanksgiving U-turn. He leaves us to guess. And here, as Luther underscored, the eighth commandment requires us all to guess kindly, with as much generosity as we can muster. So perhaps we imagine that all nine were overwhelmed by the joyous possibility of going home to hug their wives and children for the first time in years. For many people this joy of homecoming is a big piece of our own holiday today. It's a powerful force. I can see it keeping the nine from heading back to Jesus that day long ago. It's one of many things that are keeping dear and cherished friends of ours away from church this very morning.

Of course the eighth commandment calls for honesty too. So let's guess while we're at it that those nine in the story are no better than we are—no better, that is, at getting past the

original sinner's conviction that God somehow owes us

Or as Adam put it when God called him out from behind the bushes, it's all God's fault. God's fault, that is, for sticking him with *that* woman. God's fault for planting a garden with *that* tree in the middle of it. God's fault for crafting a creation that includes the peril of *that* disease, and why I'm the one who should have gotten sick with it is something God will have to explain. Better still that God should fix it. And if he does, it's only my due. Am I not as much a member of the chosen race as all those neighbors of mine who didn't get sick, and among them at least one or two who deserve to be sick as I do not? So if suddenly I am well, miracle of miracles, hasn't God simply done God's job by making things right that should not have been wrong in the first place?

I don't know if the nine were thinking along these lines as they hurried down the road to wherever they were going. I bring them up only because they're the kind of thoughts that I'd be fighting with were I in their sandals.

There are heaps of things I take for granted—things I look on as my right. It's silly of me, but there it is. I don't know that I go quite so far as to say God owes me; but my failure to thank God for them gives me away. Here I stand, a sinner like every other sinner, infected not with leprosy, but with that illness of entitlement.

May Christ have mercy. May Jesus save me from it.

We could all spend the rest of today making lists of things we never think to thank God for. Here are a few of the things that would show up on mine.

Salt. Soap. Paved streets. The expectation that when I flip a switch a light will go on. Indoor plumbing, the flushing toilet

in particular. T-shirts on sale for less than \$10. Aspirin. Novocain. Dentists who use it. Fresh meat. Can openers. My cell phone. Cheap paper. Cheaper pens. Garbage collectors. My wrist watch. Gasoline. Potatoes. Mangoes in the middle of winter. Fly swatters. Window screens. Home insulation. Phillip's head screws. The list goes on and on and on. All these things I've come to see and regard not as gifts, but as my due, my right as an American, as I sometimes think. I would grind my teeth if they were gone. I would think that I'd been cheated, and the one I'd finally blame for that is God. I'd do this just as surely as I fail to thank God now when I get to enjoy them.

"We should be so lucky," say the great majority of human beings in the rest of the world today, where it's not nearly so easy to track down a Double A battery, or to find a stapler that works.

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In the story we heard, Jesus blurts out his astonishment over the absence of the nine. I can't help but think that God is astonished today to find America's thanks so small, so lacking.

So first and foremost, let you and me thank God this day for Jesus.

Let's thank God from the depths of our hearts for the One who bled out his life not for one leper, but for all ten. In doing this he offered up his own thanks to God for each and every one of them, however thankless they themselves might be.

It's the kind that opens our eyes to Jesus' heart. After that it drives us to see as Jesus sees, with patience and compassion; with a love that reaches out in kindness to every leprous sinner, Samaritans included.

Saving faith is the faith that grasps our lack of entitlement. It understands that God owes us nothing. Yet it looks to God for everything in the happy confidence that God for Jesus' sake has called us his children and will treat us that way for the simple reason that he wants to. In Christ he insists on it.

So yes, hear this. Trust it. Cut loose with it today in thanks to God for gifts beyond counting.

Let's start right here with by joining Christ in thanks to God for each other, no matter who we are, or how we are, or where we come from, or what credentials we happen to carry or fail to carry.

After that let's take those thanks along to the day's great table, loaded as it will be with the turkey, the stuffing, and all that goes with it. Let's wrap the folks we're sitting with in Christ's appreciation for them all. Let's help them revel in God's gifts with glad and cheerful hearts as the hours go by. So too in the days, the weeks, the months to come, wherever these may take us.

Happy Thanksgiving!