

CLEANSING LEADS TO THANKSGIVING
 Luke 17:11-19; Trinity 14; September 4-5, 2021

I grew up hearing the expression, “Cleanliness is next to godliness.” Little boys especially have little concern for washing their hands before meals and don’t see any problem with crawling into a clean bed filthy after a hard day’s playing in the dirt. Mothers need all the help they can get, especially with little boys, and are not above calling on God to help them with the cause of regular bathing and cleanliness. I think that I heard, “Cleanliness is next to godliness,” especially on Saturday nights, which were always bath nights, since we would be going to church Sunday morning. Going to church dirty and in unwashed clothes was considered sinful.

Where in the Bible is found the expression, “Cleanliness is next to godliness”? Nowhere! It can be traced back to the Methodist preacher John Wesley in one of his sermons about 250 years ago, but it’s not found in the Bible, though the Bible has much to say about the need for cleanliness in order to come near to God. The Old Testament book of Leviticus has whole chapters on things that make humans unclean. Jewish men and women who were unclean were forbidden to come into God’s presence at the tabernacle or temple. Those who were found ritually unclean near to God were sentenced to death. According to God’s Word, then, cleanliness is a requirement for godliness in the sense that we must be clean to be near to God.

Cleanliness was the problem the ten lepers in our Gospel Reading had. Skin diseases classified as “leprosy” made a person unclean because flesh was rotting and dying. Death is the ultimate uncleanness because it is caused by sin. The ten leprous men had to isolate themselves from their family and friends because they were unclean and contact with others would make those others unclean. Until they were cleansed of their leprosy, they were forbidden to come near to God at the temple to worship and offer sacrifices. What those ten needed desperately was to be healed and made clean.

The problem of uncleanness caused by sin is something all of us have to deal with. In one of our confessions of sin (DS1) we come right out and say we are “by nature sinful and unclean,” and need Jesus to “**cleanse us from all unrighteousness**” (1 Jn 1:9).

What Jesus did for those ten lepers, healing and cleansing them so they could come near to God again, is what Jesus does for us. Our problem is not leprosy or any other disease because those things do not make us ritually unclean since Jesus died in His body as the last cleansing sacrifice on the cross. All the Old Testament laws about things that make us ritually unclean and prevent us from coming before God in worship were fulfilled by Jesus, who took all our uncleanness onto Himself, suffered, died and rose from the dead.

But there is one sort of uncleanness that still prevents us from coming near to God with the danger of death. That is the sin in our flesh. Since the time we were conceived in our mothers' wombs we have had this sinful uncleanness. We are born with it and live with it until we die. Sin rots our flesh like biblical leprosy. Whether we realize it or not, the stench of death clings to us wherever we go in this life. What we need is healing and cleansing, and there is nothing we can do ourselves to wash away sin and death.

This is where Jesus comes in. Like the ten lepers, we cry out to Him: **“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”** And He does have mercy. In Holy Baptism He washes away our sin and cleanses us from all unrighteousness. We are given the new birth from God above as children of our heavenly Father. We can then come near to God without fear because there no **spot or wrinkle** on us; we are **holy and without blemish** (Eph. 5:27).

Our problem, of course, is that we remain sinners after being cleansed of our sins. What Peter wrote in his Second Epistle describes our problem. **“The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire”** (2:22). This is why, when we come to worship in God's house, the first words we hear, **“In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,”** remind us who we are, the baptized children of God, who need to confess and repent of our sins. And God forgives our sins in His name, washing and cleansing us again for the sake of Jesus' **“holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death.”** **The blood of Jesus, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin** (1 Jn 1:7). The problem of our sinful uncleanness is solved by God's washing away of sin in Jesus Christ, not by anything we can do.

Cleansing leads to thanksgiving. We see this in the one leper who returned to Jesus. **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.** This joyful thanks to Jesus is probably why this text is also suggested

for use on our National Day of Thanksgiving. Today the focus is not on a general giving thanks for God's gifts, but on the thanksgiving appropriate when we come near to God in the Lord's Supper. Receiving the Lord's Supper is only appropriate after we have been cleansed in the water of Holy Baptism, coming before God having confessed our sins. Since the beginning of the Christian Church, receiving Jesus' body and blood in the Sacrament always happens after being cleansed in Holy Baptism. The unbaptized are never to receive the Lord's Supper. To do so would be to dare the holy God to strike the unclean one dead in his sins.

The Church uses a variety of names for the Sacrament of Jesus' body and blood. The Lord's Supper and Holy Communion are the most commonly used by Lutherans. One name that we have historically shied away from, because it is sometimes used to emphasize improperly human activity in this holy meal, is "the Eucharist" or "Holy Eucharist." The Sacrament of Jesus' body and blood is not primarily about our thanksgiving but about the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation we get from God when eating and drinking in true faith. But there is a proper and Christian way to understand the Lord's Supper as Eucharist, which is the Greek word for thanksgiving.

Jesus gave thanks at the institution of the Lord's Supper, which we are reminded of every time we hear His words over the bread and wine. **"... and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them... In the same way also He took the cup after supper, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them."** This shows us that that thanksgiving is always a part of receiving Jesus' body and blood.

God cleansing us from sin leads us to return to where Jesus is to fall at His feet in faith, praising God with thanksgiving. If I asked you where Jesus is found with nail-marked hands and feet and side pierced with a spear, where would that be? Where can you go right now and know that Jesus is there in His body and blood so you can fall down before Him and give thanks? The Lord's Supper, the Holy Eucharist.

Those who have faith in Jesus and are thankful for the cleansing they have received in Holy Baptism and Absolution want to go to where Jesus is and thank Him there, at the Communion rail. Jesus praised the one cleansed leper who returned to Him glorifying and thanking God. **"Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."** What Jesus literally said to him was, **"Your faith has saved**

you.” Jesus saved that man by cleansing him so he could rise from his thanksgiving and go on in life, life with a double sense.

We have received this rising and life like he did. Coming back to fall at Jesus’ feet at the Table of the Lord with thanksgiving, Jesus then dismisses us with His blessing. We rise and go from this place forgiven and cleansed to live by faith in this world. We rise and go from this place also with the promise that Jesus will raise these bodies, which will one day die physically, to live forever gloriously. Christians love to receive the Lord’s Supper because of the life and salvation we receive in it. We hear Jesus say to us, **“Rise and go; your faith has saved you.”**

Jesus noted that not all who were cleansed returned to give Him thanks. **“Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”** One concern we have as a congregation are the many who are baptized who never make it to Confirmation and the Lord’s Supper but disappear in the intervening years. Worse yet, are the many who have been cleansed and healed and began to receive Jesus’ body and blood with thanksgiving, but have since drifted away, apparently more thankful for other worldly things. What does it show about someone’s faith if he or she is no longer thankful enough to return for the Sacrament, or only very seldom? That is a sin problem.

My mother encouraged me to wash up before supper by telling me that cleanliness is next to godliness. We are cleansed of our sins so we can come near to God in the Lord’s Supper. Cleansing leads to thanksgiving; Baptism leads to the Eucharist, the thanksgiving of eating and drinking Jesus’ body and blood in the Sacrament. **“Oh, give thanks unto the Lord for He is good, and His mercy endureth forever.”** Amen.