

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/24/2008, Thanksgiving Eve
Luke 17:11-19

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

And Jesus answering said, Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine?(Luke 17:17, KJV)

My heart goes out a bit to the nine who failed to offer thanksgiving to God for their delivery from their misery, for I imagine them being so happy at their healing, that they are jumping for joy and rushing off to their loved ones to tell them the good news. Leprosy was a cruel affliction, both in terms of bodily suffering and perhaps even more in its social isolation, for the leper was driven toward the fringes of the community. Still, those nine happy lepers *should have* returned to Jesus to give thanks to God. And then, with a happy heart, they could have continued on in life.

And so, lest I be one of the nine, let me return and give thanks to my sweet Lord, Jesus. Lest I be one who has received blessings overflowing, yet speaks no word of thanksgiving, let me praise our precious Saviour, Jesus Christ.

And I believe that the way forward to do this was indicated in this past Sunday's parable of the sheep and the goats and the Last Judgment. The key wonder and mystery of that teaching is that one way to touch Jesus is to touch the poor. One way to visit with Jesus is to visit with the lonely. One way to welcome Jesus is to welcome the stranger.

Likewise, one way to give thanks to Jesus is to thank his people. And you, Dearhearts, are the very people of God for me. This congregation, as is true for all congregations gathered around the Blessed Word and Sacraments of our Lord Jesus, is the veritable Body of Christ for me. You are the Church, Christ is in your midst wherever two or three are gathered together in His name, and so my way of returning to Jesus, like a healed leper conscious of having received great blessings, is to turn to you and to say thanks.

Seventeen years ago, Carol and I and our boys celebrated our first Thanksgiving here in the city. Carol tells me she will never forget it. I had begun my ministry here at Immanuel a few months earlier. Carol, Sam, and David remained in Pennsylvania, packing up our dear old country house there and getting ready to move to the city. It so happened that the moving van arrived at the parsonage just the day before Thanksgiving, and so, naturally, on the festival day itself the parsonage was in disarray. We had furniture in boxes spread all over the place, with hardly a kitchen table to serve a meal on. But we were young and strong and delighted to be here and there were no problems for us. We dashed out, bought ourselves a turkey, and made the mashed potatoes and pies and had our first Thanksgiving here in the City.

Well, if you have been over to the parsonage recently, you know that the parsonage is once again in disarray, with hardly kitchen table space enough for Thanksgiving. The reason for the disarray is a good and needful one: we are updating the electrical supply in the parsonage.

And once again, Carol and I are happy at Thanksgiving time. We do not mind the mess. We do not mind the small kitchen table. We are planning on Thanksgiving Dinner for our little family, and life is good. Very good.

Seventeen years. Seventeen years now stretch between those two disorderly Thanksgivings. And we are very mindful that we have received many blessings over those years, and many of those blessings are connected with this congregation.

You can easily imagine that if I spent a Thanksgiving Eve sermon giving thanks for particular blessings I've known here at Immanuel, well, the remainder of my Thanksgiving Eve preaching career would be set here at Immanuel. It will take more than one sermon to give thanks to you all. But one must begin somewhere, and let me begin with these few particular blessings. I am grateful for each one.

I begin with Evelyn Junge and Georgia Lind, for they brought me as close to heaven recently as I have known. It was during that wonderful stretch of Sundays from the end of summer to All Saints Sunday when Sunday by Sunday we sang the Lutheran Chorale Mass. That meant that we replaced many of the traditional liturgical elements with Lutheran hymns. One of my favorites of those is the hymn replacement for the *Sanctus* — a hymn composed by Martin Luther called “Isaiah, mighty seer, in days of old”:

Isaiah, mighty seer, in days of old
the Lord of all in spirit did behold
high on a lofty throne, in splendor bright,
with flowing train that filled the temple quite.
Above the throne were stately seraphim;
six wings had they, these messengers of him.
With twain they veiled their faces, as was meet,
with twain in rev'rent awe they hid their feet,
and with the other twain aloft they soared,
one to the other called and praised the Lord:
“Holy is God, the Lord of Sabaoth!
Holy is God, the Lord of Sabaoth!
Holy is God, the Lord of Sabaoth!
Behold, his glory filleth all the earth!”
The beams and lintels trembled at the cry,
and clouds of smoke enwrapped the throne on high.

On that particular heavenly day, Evelyn Junge was our Assisting Minister and Georgia Lind our Communion Assistant. So, there I was, certainly a thorn between two roses, and I was able to hear their strong sweet voices singing out those mighty words:

“Holy is God, the Lord of Sabaoth!
Holy is God, the Lord of Sabaoth!
Holy is God, the Lord of Sabaoth!
Behold, his glory filleth all the earth!”
The beams and lintels trembled at the cry,
and clouds of smoke enwrapped the throne on high.

For such liturgical joys, I give great thanks to Immanuel Lutheran Church, and so to my Lord Jesus.

By the way, it is a similar joy for me whenever Evelyn brings her hymnal to the Communion rail and sings the Communion hymn till I come and bring her the Sacramental bread. Some of the hymns she seems to know by heart.

Next let me speak of my brother and sister clergy here at Immanuel. It is with my vocation as with yours: it is a pleasure to talk shop with professionals you respect.

First of all, I am thinking of Pastor David Lotz. His distinguished twenty-seven year ministry here at Immanuel overlapped mine by about a decade, and I miss him a lot. It is the nature of my particular mind that I tend to remember, not visual images, but fragments of conversations. And so it is that I remember a passing sacristy conversation with Pastor Lotz in which he pointed out to me that people's strengths and often intimately connected with their weaknesses. Or, the other way round, their weaknesses are often the shadow side of important strengths. I have often found this to be so. I am grateful to Pastor Lotz for many such conversations and to Immanuel Lutheran Church, for it is here that I have enjoyed such blessings.

Other clergy come to mind. I think of dear old Charles Trexler and Assistant Pastor Patti Welch and that young theologian Ashley Hall. All of them are gone now and I miss them an awful lot. I am grateful to this congregation for my chance to know such good people.

And I recall Pastor Raymond Schulze often. In a way, he is a pastoral hero for me. He had all the gifts of mind and heart, spirit and music to be an extraordinary pastor. And I cherish this fragment of conversation in particular: Ray had preached here, and when he was done, he asked to use my phone so that he could call Margaret. I led him to my office, showed him how to dial, and he encouraged me to linger because it would be a brief call checking in with Margaret, and then we could return to coffee hour. And so he spoke with Margaret, said good-bye to her, put down the phone, looked up at me with those great sad eyes of his, and he said this: "God, I love that woman!" I give my thanks to this congregation, and so to my Lord Jesus, to have been able to witness such things.

And then, there was John Puelle. He was a geyser of Christian grace and joy in our congregation. I remember him laughing and praising the ancient Prayer of the Day for the Sixth Sunday of Easter

O God, from whom all good things come: Lead us by the inspiration of your Spirit to think those things which are right, and by your goodness help us to do them; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

And with that merry look in his eyes, John said, "That is! That's the combination we need: to both *think* those things which are right, and by God's grace, to *do* them!"

And finally, let me speak of two students of poetry here at Immanuel. Most recently, there was Roberta Albrecht. Oh! What a joy she was for me. I have not spoken two words to her since she and David retired to Wisconsin, but I miss her so very much. She is a scholar of the Metaphysical Poets, especially of John Donne. Donne was an Anglican priest and Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London during the 1620s. Quite often something in my sermon would provoke a memory in Roberta of a passage in Donne, and she would email that passage to me and discuss it with me.

And the other student of poetry was a young woman I will call Heather, though that was not her real name. I doubt that there is a soul in this congregation who would recall Heather, but I was her pastor here at Immanuel, and I got to know her quite well through pastoral conversation. Heather is for me a symbol of all the beautiful young people who have crossed our church threshold over the years, but with sorrow in their hearts.

Heather was a graduate of Valparaiso University in Indiana, which is one of our Lutheran pride-and-joy colleges. She majored in English and Latin. She graduated from Chicago Law School and became a public defender here in our city. She loved poetry, she baked scones. She was absolutely beautiful in my eyes. The sorrow for her was that she had fallen in love with a devout Roman Catholic portfolio manager here in the city — so devout that in the end he took his vows in Opus Dei and left her behind. Shortly afterwards, she left and moved to Australia. I have not heard from her since, but I thought of her back then what I have often thought since concerning single people in our church: What is wrong with this world that such a one should be left lonely! What is wrong with this world!

Well, all these good people were folks I was able to know because I live in this congregation, and I want you to know that I am grateful.

Most times on Thanksgiving Eve, I urge us to be thankful people and offer reasons why we should be grateful. But giving reasons for gratitude is different from being grateful, and this time I have simply wanted you to know that I am grateful to be part of this congregation, and in letting you know, I believe myself to be letting Jesus know too, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.