



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity, September 5th, 2010

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

The underlying theme of today's Propers – the collect appointed and today's bible readings – can broadly be described as God's thoughts on prayer. And one of the most striking things about it all is they are not unduly complicated. This is a mercy:

After all, most prayers tend to fall into the "shopping list" category: "God bless mom, dad, brother Mike and sister Moira, and Auntie Jane. Oh, and please help grandma get over her arthritis." Or even more common: "Oh God, get me out of this one and I'll never do anything naughty again."

This type of prayer is not merely superficial, but positively banal when measured against the opening prayer at Holy Communion: "Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid . . ."

If this truly frightening collect is correct – and everything we know about God tells us it is – there is absolutely no hiding from God. He knows our innermost secrets: the dark and furtive thoughts that we would not divulge to our closest friends. In fact, he knows our thoughts even before they are formulated.

But if this is the case, what is the point of

prayer? Why should we pray when God already knows not only our most confidential secrets, but our most fundamental needs? Why do we need to pray to him, when he's got us under such constant and close surveillance nothing we can say or do amazes or surprises him? Wouldn't we be running the risk of boring him, or, worse, getting on his nerves?

The answer is that we should pray to him because he wants us to. And because he is our creator and redeemer, we would be wise to do what he wants. But the reason he wants us to pray is not because it's good for him, but because it's good for us. It is not within our power to do him any good. However, the fact of the matter is the closer we can bring ourselves to him, the better it is for us.

So how do we go about the business of getting in closer contact with him? Today's collect says it all. The first thing we need to bring to our prayers is faith, hope and charity, St. Paul's big three.

If we lack faith that God will hear our prayers, and the hope that he will respond to us, and the good will – charity – that inspires sincerity there is absolutely no point in getting down on our knees.

Faith, hope and, especially, charity do not come easily to naturally selfish human beings and, thus, it makes sense for us to beg God to increase these virtues in us in order to make our prayer life more effective. The more we grow in faith, hope and charity, the more closely our agendas will be aligned with God's agenda.

Having covered theory in the collect, today's Gospel provides us with a practical case study on prayer. The case involves 10 lepers who Jesus cured by a miracle of healing – a miracle indistinguishable from countless others. And it began with a shopping list prayer: "O Lord, get me out of this one." The lepers actually shouted: "Jesus, master, have mercy upon us." But it means the same thing.

"Go and shew yourselves to the priests," Jesus replied. It was such a rare thing for lepers to be cured that the law required that such claims be certified by the Jewish equivalent of the Archbishop of Canterbury. In any event, the lepers took off in a hurry and along the way they discovered they had been cured. The thing that Luke finds remarkable is that only one of them returned to say thanks. And ironically, that one thankful person was the only non-Jew among them: a hated Samaritan.

But as far as our case history of prayer is concerned the folks we should consider are the nine lepers who didn't come back. But before we do, we need to understand something about the nature of the disease.

Today it's hard to imagine the feelings of horror leprosy inspired. The fear of AIDS probably comes closest. Like AIDS, leprosy was a certain killer. Like AIDS, it often left its victims horribly disfigured. All this helps explain why from earliest human history down to today, contracting leprosy has been

regarded as the most awful fate that could befall a human being.

Jesus rescued the 10 lepers from a living death and a living hell. And from this perspective, we find it hard to understand why nine of them failed to return – not simply to thank him, but to consecrate their lives to his service. It wasn't that they didn't believe Jesus was the Messiah. Their plea for help demonstrates their faith: "Master have mercy on us." Nor did they doubt his ability to heal them. Their only uncertainty was his willingness to do so. Why, then, did they not give thanks?

Actually, if you'd asked them why they hadn't given thanks, they would probably have been outraged. They would have told you that they rejoiced and gave thanks to God all the way to Jerusalem and then rejoiced and gave thanks to God all the way back to their homes. But this misses the point.

There is a vast difference between shouting a perfunctory "hallelujah" and meeting God face to face to give him thanks. Most of us do what the lepers did – give God a shopping list of prayers, and mere perfunctory thanks when he answers them,

God wants our thanks because it helps build up the close relationship with him that makes faith, hope and charity grow in our hearts. In giving him genuine, heartfelt thanks, we learn to give him the genuine, heartfelt praise that leads to the deepest sort of prayer -- the prayer that lifts us to his presence where we may be still and know that he is God. And that, after all, is what prayer is really all about. *AMEN.*

***To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be
Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power,
Both Now and Forever. AMEN.***