



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Fourteenth Sunday After Trinity, September 6th 2015

“And Jesus answering said, Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine? There are not found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger. And he said unto him, Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole.”

✠ In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN ✠

As Christians, we are called to pray. Not as a suggestion or matter of “best practice,” but as an outright commandment. The fact that prayer is essential to the Christian life is woven throughout the Bible from Genesis through Revelation. As I said on Trinity 11, prayer is the most intimate way we can know God, the sacraments notwithstanding. When we pray, we transcend the divide between the physical and the mystical; you have never said a prayer that wasn't heard by Almighty God.

As Anglicans, we are especially steeped in prayer. We are known even among other groups of Christians as being a prayerful people; after all, the first thing most people know about us is one of our great contributions to the church catholic - the Book of Common Prayer. The BCP contains not only the entire liturgies for the saying of The Mass and the daily offices of Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. It also has baptisms, funerals, prayers for civil and religious leaders, and even prayers for rain. And if you read any of the supporting works, like the Manual For Priests, you'll find hundreds of other prayers, such as the blessing of a house, and a blessing for a child in the womb; and if you can't find a particular prayer or blessing, don't despair - the book concludes with a prayer and blessing “for any particular thing.” Suffice it to say, we have this “prayer thing” fairly well covered.

Now, Alison and the children and I just got back from a week in the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Every year we pack up the ever-expanding horde of children and get a house near the water, and

spend a week doing very little except swimming, snacking, and enjoying time as a family together. This year, a few days before we left, it came to my attention that a billing mistake might have caused us to lose our reservation on our house, and there was precious little left to rent at that point. My very first reaction was to pray; “Oh God,” I prayed, “please let us keep this house. Please let nobody else swipe it from us during this mistake on the rental agent's part.”

Twenty minutes later, I had made the necessary phone calls to the rental agent, to their billing company, and back to the rental agent again. And everything was fine; they acknowledged their error and we were set to start packing. The first thing I did was breathe a giant sigh of relief. The second thing I did was go and tell Alison the good news. The third thing I did is what any good Christian would do - I poured a cup of coffee. Finally, about ten minutes later, I said the prayer that I think I might say most often in life - “God, I'm sorry I forgot to say thank you.”

The fact is, I wish I could say I was joking, or exaggerating to make a point. But “God, I'm sorry I forgot to say thank you” is outweighed in my prayer rotation probably only by the supplications that make it necessary in the first place. This is a common ailment even among people of faith, as the relief we feel when we're delivered from a trial, even a minor one, can cause us to go straight to celebrating without giving thanks first. I say “even among people of faith,” but the more apropos way to phrase it would

be “**especially**” among people of faith - after all, it’s the nine “people of faith” in this narrative who don’t think to return to give thanks.

They certainly had enough faith in this prophet and possible Messiah to come and ask for His blessing, saying “Jesus, Master, have mercy upon us.” And they even had enough faith to set out to see the temple priests before being healed, trusting Jesus that they would be healed on the way. Which, in the Biblical narrative, is an improvement. After all, the last time a prophet tried telling a leper how to be healed, it was the prophet Elisha, and the leper, whose name was Naaman actually became angry.

Elisha told Naaman via messenger to go bathe in the Jordan seven times and he would be healed of his leprosy. Naaman’s response was anger both at the fact that Elisha didn’t simply wave his hands and perform some magic, and at the fact that he was to bathe himself in water in Israel, which was not a very hip town. And Naaman only went through with the prescription of the prophet after his own servants had the chutzpah to admonish him for ignoring it.

Naaman, like the Samaritan in this story, was a foreigner - specifically a Syrian. Yet he came to a prophet of the God of Abraham for healing. And when he was delivered, he returned immediately to Elisha, as the Samaritan does to Jesus, and gave thanks saying, “*behold, now I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel.*” Naaman departs as a servant of God, with a blessing from Elisha.

And that is ultimately the blessing the Samaritan receives when he returns to Jesus to give thanks, and Jesus tells him “*Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole.*” Jesus is not merely saying that the man is cured of leprosy and is free to depart. Certainly, that much is already evident; noting it out loud is not necessary. And noting it specifically about the Samaritan seems unnecessary, as the other nine men *shared in the same physical blessing* as the Samaritan. And we have no indication whatsoever that in His frustration over their lack of gratitude, that Jesus returned the other nine to their prior unclean state. They no doubt went and presented themselves to the temple priests and were thus allowed to re-enter mainstream society as healthy and clean individuals after that, which is very much a blessing in itself; they were likely consigned to live the rest of their mortal lives in a leper colony, and could now simply go home and pick their lives back up.

The blessing the Samaritan received is the same as the blessing that Naaman received; the blessing of coming to faith in the God of Israel, through the act of thanksgiving. Just as Naaman declared “*now I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel,*” the Samaritan falls down in front of Jesus to give thanks to God, because he recognizes the power of God in Jesus, and recognizes Jesus as the group of ten had originally addressed him when asking for healing - “master.”

And this is likewise ultimately the blessing we receive when *we* continue in thanksgiving, when minds and our spirits become focused and *stay focused* on the source of our blessing and our happiness. Surely, God does bless us with acts of temporal kindness and mercy. We do see God’s blessings when vacation houses come through for a week, when the mechanic says the repair is affordable, or when the doctor says the tests look fine. But our final blessing - the blessing that Naaman received in giving thanks to Elisha, and the blessing the Samaritan received in giving thanks to Jesus, and the blessing that we receive from God, is our ongoing sanctification when we praise God for His work in our lives. That is when Jesus says to us “*Arise, thy faith hath made thee whole.*”

There’s a practical reason that the order for both Holy Communion and the order for Morning Prayer save the thanksgiving until just before the end of the service; thanksgiving is generally responsorial. There’s a spiritual purpose to it as well, though; we leave with our thanksgiving to God for the gift of prayer and fellowship and sacraments fresh in our minds. We depart focused on gratefulness and thanksgiving and in doing so, keep ourselves grounded in grace and faith.

When we say the thanksgiving today, let’s be especially mindful of all the ways God not only blesses us in this life, but in the life to come. *Amen.*