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Our Saviour Lutheran Church  
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Pentecost 18

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, on the surface, this morning's gospel reading would appear to be about proper etiquette.

On the surface, this gospel reading would seem to be nothing more than a simple teaching on giving thanks.

When someone does something nice for us, we are taught from the time we are wee little children...

When someone does something nice for us, we are taught to say "thank you."

Someone holds the door for us, we say "thank you."

Someone pays us a compliment, we say "thank you."

And when someone miraculously heals us of a dreaded skin disease like leprosy, we should stop and say "thank you."

On the surface that would appear to be the message of this gospel passage.

Remember to say "thank you."

And, this is how this text is often preached.

In fact, this gospel text often appears as the gospel reading for the celebration of the Thanksgiving holiday.

I have in fact preached on this next numerous times at our Thanksgiving Eve service here at Our Saviour.

PAUSE

But, there is actually something much deeper going on here in this gospel text than just a reminder to say "thank you."

I would propose that this text is actually all about one's focus of worship.

Yes, it could very well be argued, in fact I would it dare say it ought to be argued, that his text is about WHERE we worship.

And indeed this text is about HOW we worship.

This text then is about the very heart of our faith lives.

So, with this in mind, let's delve into this text.

And the first things the gospel writer Luke would have us notice is where this scene takes place.

Where is Jesus when he heals the 10 lepers?

Now Luke tells us that Jesus is headed toward Jerusalem, and the mention of Jerusalem should remind us that that is where the Holy Temple resides.

The Temple was the focus of Jewish worship. The Temple was the home of God here on earth. This is where Jews went to worship God, but Luke, as we will see, wants to reshape worship.

Now, ancients Jews spoke of Jerusalem, the place where God resided on earth, Jews spoke of Jerusalem as being the highest place on the face of the earth, such that when one travelled toward Jerusalem, regardless of the direction from which one travelled...

When one travelled toward Jerusalem, it was said that one was travelling "up" to Jerusalem.

And when one travelled away from Jerusalem, regardless of the direction, one was travelling "down" from Jerusalem.

We do a similar thing when we travel north. We might say, "We are going UP to Maine."

And when we travel south, we might say, "We are DOWN to Florida."

But, ancients Jews used "up" and "down" to describe one's travels toward or away from Jerusalem, irrespective of the direction.

All this is by way of saying that Luke reminds us at the beginning of this story, Luke subtly hints at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

Luke subtly hints towards what was the focus of Jewish worship at that time—the Holy Temple.

But then notice the next detail.

Jesus is going to Jerusalem through the region BETWEEN Samaria and Galilee, Galilee being part of the northern district in the Holy Land.

Jesus is in between Samaria and Israel.

Luke is wont to say here then that Jesus is neither in Samaria where Samaritans worshipped God at Mt. Gerizim, nor is Jesus in the Holy Land of Israel, where Jews worshipped God at Jerusalem.

Jesus is in the in-between space, neither here nor there.

And it is as though, Luke uses this geographical marker to say that worship of God is not centered in the Holy Land per se, worship is not focused in Jerusalem, it is not focused in the Temple.

Nor is the worship of God centered in Samaria at Mount Gerizim.

But worship of God as we will come to see as we read deeper into this gospel text is indeed focused in Jesus.

Worship is not limited to this cultic site nor that cultic site, but worship is focused on the person Jesus.

PAUSE

So, Jesus is in this in-between place, between Samaria and the Holy Land, and while he is travelling there, 10 lepers approach him.

Now, we need to remember something here, and that is that a leper was banished from worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, until that leper was deemed “clean” again.

And it was the priests who would determine if an individual was clean.

And so this is why Jesus, when he responds to the 10 lepers call for mercy, tells them to show themselves to the priests.

Only the priests would be able to say to the lepers, “You are clean.”

And only then could formerly unclean persons be able to worship again at the Temple.

And as the lepers then were on their way to the priests, they discover that lo and behold they were miraculously clean.

And nine of the lepers continue on their way, presumably to the Jewish priests, so that they could be officially declared “clean.”

But one, ONE of the former lepers turns back to Jesus.

And the text says that this former leper is praising God, and the former leper prostrates himself before Jesus.

Now, all of this man’s actions here should be understood as worship.

To prostrate one’s self, to fall at the feet of Jesus, is a sign of worship.

And to praise God is of course a sign of worship.

And furthermore, by going to Jesus as opposed to the priests, Luke suggests that Jesus himself is the high priest.

So, what we are to understand from all of this is that Jesus is the new focal point of worship.

Not the Temple and priests in Jerusalem.

Nor the cultic site at Mt. Gerizim in Samaria.

No! Jesus is the Holy Temple, high priest and all.

Jesus is the one who declares a person clean. He is the one through whom praises are directed to God. Jesus is the one who is God.

Jesus is the site (S-I-T-E) of our worship.

PAUSE

Now the Gospel of John also emphasizes this point.

In John’s Gospel at the very beginning of his gospel John speaks about how “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God...”

And a little later on, John continues, saying “And the Word became fleshed and lived among us.”

The phrase “lived among us” is actually better translated as “tabernacled among us.”

“Tabernacled among us.”

And if we remember from the Old Testament, the Tabernacle was the movable, the portable tent the Israelites carried with them in their wilderness journey.

When the Israelites left Egypt and travelled in the wilderness they didn't have, of course, as permanent structure like the Temple in Jerusalem where they could worship God.

But instead, they set up a special tent, called the Tabernacle, whenever they stopped along their journey and camped for awhile.

And it was the Tabernacle that served as the place of worship, the meeting place where God met with his people, particularly Moses.

And so, for the gospel writer John to say that Jesus tabernacled among us, is to say that the person Jesus is now the portable, moveable place of worship for God's people.

Jesus is the site (S-I-T-E) of worship.

Jesus is the focus of our worship.

PAUSE

And so, we may be wondering then, “Well, what then does the church building of today mean for worship?”

Do we even need church buildings? Do we need places of worship, if in fact Jesus is the site of worship?

Don't get me wrong.

I am not suggesting that we should do away with church buildings.

But, this passage from Luke's Gospel does give us pause to evaluate where and how we worship.

Indeed, we do have to be mindful that the church building is something that should serve us, and not something we serve.

We do have to be careful, for instance, so as not to let the maintenance of the church building supersede the ministry of the gospel.

This is in part what triggered the Reformation after all, which we will be celebrating in a few weeks' time.

Luther was angered by the fact that the Church elites were fleecing its members through the sale of indulgences, in order to provide funds for the beautification of the St. Peter's basilica and other church buildings.

And sometimes we see a similar thing happening today, where congregations devote resources more to the building than to the work the congregation needs to be doing outside the building.

So, that is one insight we can take away from this gospel lesson—that we shouldn't allow the church building to become our god.

HOW we worship is more about the WHOM than the PLACE.

And the second insight is this, which is really a different side of the same coin.

The second insight is this that our worship is to be AS focused out there in the world AS it is here in the church.

Jesus is presented in scripture as the portable, the moveable sanctuary.

Jesus is the answer then to WHERE we are to focus our worship. Where does the former leper focus his worship?

And so where do we go to find Jesus in the world out there?

Well, Martin Luther was helpful here as well.

For Luther taught us that Christ is present in the interaction we have with those persons in need.

Take, for instance our gospel reading for today; Jesus is present with the 10 lepers.

So, it is interesting in that we learn that the presence of God shows up, wherever neighbor meets neighbor, particular where one neighbor cares for another neighbor, there is where we find God.

And in one person caring for another person is HOW true worship of God is often evident.

Jesus says it this way in Matthew's gospel, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

We might nuance that a bit so as to say, that "wherever two or three are gathered in caring, there Jesus is found."

So, the moveable, portable sanctuary shows up unexpectedly wherever we show up to care for our neighbors.

It makes me think of the time when I was helping with the cleanup effort in Biloxi, Mississippi, after Hurricane Katrina.

And a resident down in Biloxi asked me and my group why we would come down from Pennsylvania to help them rebuild their communities.

To which we said, "We really couldn't help but do so. This is what God has does for all of us, in his Son. He came down from heaven to help us rebuild our lives through the power of his cross."

And that, Friends, is worship. And that one former leper from long ago got it, while his other companions missed it.

Jesus is the tabernacle, the cultic site.

It is he whom we worship, and where we find Jesus is anywhere where there is a neighbor in need.

So even as we worship here now, when we go from here, when the liturgy has ended and we leave church, God says to all of us, "Let NOW the worship begin."

Thanks be to God. AMEN.