11/21-22/20 Give Praise! Rev. Amy Haines

Luke 17:11-19

Last week I asked our preschoolers in children’s church what they were thankful for. We had many children say mommy or daddy or name their sisters or brothers. We had several say they were thankful for their beds or their blankies or hot cocoa. I think I arrived just after a special snack that day! Other children mentioned friends, or playing outside, and a few did mention God.

What are you thankful for today? Even amid the struggles of 2020, what do you give thanks for today? I would love to hear your responses on the way out of worship today [or if you are online, I would love to read them later if you list them on the Facebook feed.]

Today I am thankful for being a part of this chapter on your journeys of faith, and to have you be a part of my journey. I am thankful for each one of you who continue to prioritize worship with your family. I am thankful for the many ways you care for others, even from the confines of your homes. I am thankful for your honesty and your commitment as you learn how to live by faith following Jesus.

Together, we are the body of Christ. Together, we are called to offer our praise to God.

Yet, how many of us are struggling to praise God at this time? How hard is it to praise God with the community of faith when we are few in number together and we cannot see one another virtually?

Due to COVID, much of life has changed. This holiday season, many families are not physically meeting together. Other families are grieving an empty seat at the family table. Traditions are on hold. Schedules are different. Friends are sick. We are surrounded by uncertainty and fear.

How can we offer praise in the midst of so much struggle?

We can offer praise because we are not the first to struggle. Or quarantine. Or cry out to God, save us. Time and again throughout the scriptures, praise is offered to God in spite of circumstances. Many of the psalms are songs of praise following a time of struggle. Many of the Jewish festivals were created to remember God’s presence and their endurance through the dark valleys of life. Even our celebration of Jesus’ resurrection begins with the agony of the cross.

We are called to offer praise in spite of our struggles. We are called to offer praise in defiance of our struggles. We are called to offer praise because praise is not about us; praise is about God. Praise is our response to God.

Tony Evans once declared:

…God says to give thanks in everything. That doesn’t mean you need to give thanks FOR everything. You don’t need to give thanks FOR that bad day. Or FOR that bad relationship.

Or being passed over at work. Financial hardship. Whatever it is – you are not to give thanks FOR the difficulties, but rather IN the difficulties. That is a very important distinction, and one I think we often miss. Giving thanks IN everything shows a heart of faith that God is bigger than the difficulties and that He can use them, if you approach Him with the right heart and spirit, for your good and His glory.

-thepastorsworkshop.com:thanksgiving

There are days when I admit I allow stress or anxiety to get the best of me and I forget to be thankful for even the smallest blessings in life.

On the days when I struggle to be thankful, I think of Kimberly, a classmate of mine in seminary,

who struggled to even get out of bed in the morning and drag her body to class, food, or chapel. Kimberly had a lot of health problems that year and sometimes would be so weak

she would have to be wheeled to class in a wheelchair. But one thing that kept Kimberly going during that year of struggle was her ability to give thanks. She didn’t give thanks for her struggles; rather, each day she would find five things from that day for which she was thankful,

and offer her praise to God. At times, she stretched her mind to find five things for that day.

At times, she offered praise simply for God being God, as she could not even get out of bed.

I imagine the ten leprous men in today’s scripture did not give thanks for their skin disease and outcast status.

Because these men had leprosy and were thought to be contagious, they were not allowed to be with their families, not allowed to worship at synagogue or temple, not allowed to hold a job, not allowed to live within any city limits.

These lepers banded together and begged for alms or food or clothing on the edge of towns and villages, depending on the courtesy of strangers and friends to help them survive another day.

Typically, if anyone approached this colony of lepers, they would cry out, “Unclean! Unclean!”

urging people to keep their distance. Many would simply walk by these leprous men. They would ignore them or cross by on the other side.

When Jesus approached, his reputation must have preceded him. The cry of the lepers changed from “Unclean! Unclean!” to a cry of “Jesus, Master, have mercy upon us!”

Jesus heard them and saw them. Jesus honored their humanity, like he does so often within the Gospel of Luke. Jesus saw and loved all of God’s beloved children—insiders and outcasts, men and women, religious leaders and sinners, Jews and Gentiles, the hurt, the broken, the unclean.

Jesus heard these leprous men, saw them, then stopped and spoke to them: “Go, show yourselves to the priests.”

Notice Jesus didn’t touch them. He didn’t tell them to go wash. He didn’t give them complex instructions. He told them to go, to obey his words, to follow the Law of Moses and show themselves to the priests.

Now, this may have sounded like a strange request to their ears. They weren’t yet healed.

Why would they show themselves to a priest, the only person who could declare them clean or unclean, the only one who had the power over their status in the community?

According to Luke, they didn’t question Jesus. Instead, they left. They obeyed. They began the journey to find their priest.

And as they went, they were cleansed. In the midst of the journey, they were healed.

Can you imagine their wonder and joy when they realized they were healed? Can you imagine their astonishment that Jesus had healed them?

I often picture these 10 men living into Acts 3:8, when the man born blind who was suddenly healed went walking and leaping and praising God.

Nine of the former lepers continued on to the priest, to be declared officially healed. To be officially welcomed back to family and homes and jobs and the community of faith.

But one former leper turned back to find Jesus, fall down on his knees, to say thanks in the midst of his praise to God. And this man was a Samaritan.

A Samaritan! A despised neighbor to the Jews. The black sheep of the family tree. No Jewish leader would knowingly heal a Samaritan. Most Jews would cross to the other side of the road

in order to not come in contact with the shadow of a Samaritan. Jews who lived in the Galilee would journey the long way around Samaria in order to not cross into that despised land.

Yet Jesus, on his way to Jerusalem, walked along the border between Galilee and Samaria. On the way to his death, he is still expanding the family of God by welcoming those considered outcast by others. On the way to his death, Jesus is still offering the grace and love and healing of God to all who crossed paths with him.

Jesus told 10 men to go and be healed. Yet only one turned back to offer common courtesy and say thanks—and that one was the last person anyone would have expected to offer praise.

In turning back, not only was his body healed, but Jesus also proclaimed that he was saved by faith. “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”

Once again, Jesus expands the table of grace. He expands who is welcome to come and receive the gifts of God.

Today, no matter our struggles, no matter our circumstances, no matter who we are or where we have been, Jesus continues to offer the table of grace to each and every one of us.

Are we ready to accept such a gift and give thanks? Are we ready to praise God from whom all blessings flow? Are we ready to praise God today in the midst of our circumstances,

whatever they may be?

One summer during seminary I worked for Little Brothers: Friends of the Elderly outside of Chicago. I met a woman there who welcomed each morning with praise to the Lord

for being alive another day. She had seen many family members and friends pass on before her,

yet instead of wishing to join them in death, she warmly welcomed the opportunity each day would bring to live and smile and share her love of Jesus.

How different she was to some of the other men and women I encountered that summer

who mourned their deteriorating health or growled at the world because they believed

the world had been unkind to them.

Although she could have complained, she gave thanks. She allowed her memories to shape her present, and her present to include praise from a grateful heart.

Our closing hymn was written by a Lutheran pastor named Martin Rinkart who lived in the walled city of Eilenberg in Saxony during the siege of the Thirty Years War. Eilenberg was surrounded and the people within suffered from the plague and from starvation,

until the pastors in town were burying 12 people a day. Pretty soon the pastors themselves started to die and Martin Rinkart became the only pastor left. He buried over 5,000 people in one year, conducting 40-50 funerals a day, including his own wife.

Yet when the war ended in 1648 he sat down, and penned these incredible words of gratitude

in response to God’s faithfulness:

Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,

Who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices;

Who from our mothers’ arms has blessed us on our way

With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

—Deb Kielsmeier, “Thanksgiving,” 11-25-04,

christpresbyterian.com in Homiletics 11-20-05

This week, even amid the struggles of 2020, I invite you to offer your praise to God.

We worship a God who is with us, a God who redeems us, a God who offers us hope and salvation! Offer your praise to God for Jesus who loves us, Jesus who forgives us, Jesus who shows us how to live by God’s ways! Offer your praise to God for the Holy Spirit’s guidance and perseverance and strength whatever our circumstances. Offer your praise to God for the blessings of everyday life, however small they may be.

Our world needs to hear the good news we celebrate this day! Our world needs to be grounded in hope, in faith, in praise. Especially in the midst of struggle and sorrow.

So now we, too, are called to lift our hearts and voices in thankfulness to God.

May we find our voice and offer our praise this week, this day, this hour.

Amen.