

**The Eve of Thanksgiving**  
**November 22, 2017**  
**Luke 17:11-19**

*“Returning to Give Thanks”*

His name was Eckhart vom Hochheim (1260-1328), but he is more commonly known as Meister Eckhart. He lived in the Middle Ages, and died a century and a half before Luther was born in 1483. He was a German theologian, philosopher, and mystic, and was a member of the Dominican Order of Preachers. He was accused and tried for heresy, but seems to have died before any verdict was pronounced. For more than a century now, there has been renewed interest in the writings of Meister Eckhart ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meister\\_Eckhart](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meister_Eckhart)). One of my favorites of his is this: “If the only prayer you said in your whole life was, ‘thank you,’ that would suffice.” I like that a lot. It speaks to the importance of giving thanks in our lives, which is what this National Day of Thanksgiving is all about. Thanksgiving involves a returning as people come from near and far to join family and friends over turkey and all the trimmings. It is this concept of returning that I’d like to focus the message on this evening under the theme, “Returning to Give Thanks.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

The Gospel lesson appointed to be read for Thanksgiving is Jesus’ healing of the ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19). It is a powerful and moving story of Jesus helping and healing when no one else would or could. It is a story of gratitude for blessings received. Then as now, there were outcasts in society. Lepers were the outcasts of the ancient world, cut off from home and family; forced to live in communes and colonies with fellow lepers to contain the spread of the disease. Lepers were often reduced to beggars, reliant on whatever others would toss at them. It was a sad and sorry existence. The cry of the lepers when they saw Jesus is really our own cry: **“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.”** If we’re honest with ourselves, on some level don’t we all stand in need of Jesus’ healing mercy? Jesus graciously healed them all as they went to show themselves to the priests, but only one of the ten healed returned to give thanks to Jesus. And he was an outsider, a foreigner; a Samaritan. There is great irony in this. What are we to learn here?

With Thanksgiving upon us, we may wonder what there is to be thankful for, especially in these volatile and uncertain times in which we live. The polarized politics of our nation and world will be the “elephant in the room” for many people around the Thanksgiving dinner table. This year especially we have witnessed terrible loss of life and property through natural disasters: hurricanes, flooding, earthquakes, and fires. It will take a very long time to recover from such destruction. This year has also witnessed the worst mass shooting in the history of our nation with what took place in Las Vegas in early October. And this is not even taking into account the personal stuff going on in our individuals lives where there may be setbacks, disappointments, and failures. Given all of these things, it would be very easy to become cynical, angry and bitter. Is there another way – a better way?

It may well be that the simple act of returning to give thanks is antidote to the cynicism, anger and bitterness in the world around us. In our own lives, we know how important it is to hear those two words: thank you. To say thank you is to acknowledge the place we have in each other’s lives, and the blessing we are to one another. We all have a choice to make in daily life: will we see the blessings and gifts that come to us from the Lord’s hand, and seeing them, will we return to give thanks? So often in life, we take things for granted. We see only what we do not have and we fail to give thanks for what we do have. Often, we see only what we do not have, which works against thanksgiving. Before we even realize it, we become like those nine lepers who were healed and went on their merry way. But no thanks are offered.

Our sending hymn at the close of this service is the much-loved “Now Thank We All Our God.” This hymn was written by Martin Rinkhart (1586-1649), a German Lutheran pastor, amidst the horrors of the

Thirty Years' War of 1618-1648. Pastor Rinkhart served for thirty-two years in Eilenburg, a walled city in eastern Germany, just south of Wittenberg. "Since Eilenburg was a walled city, people from miles around sought refuge there [during the Thirty Years' War], and overcrowding resulted in famine and pestilence. When in 1637 the superintendent left and two other clergymen died, Rinkart alone was left to minister to the city, sometimes preaching burial services for forty or fifty persons in one day. His wife also was taken by the pestilence, and he himself fell ill, but survived. Twice also he dissuaded the Swedish commander from imposing excessive tribute on the town. His services, however, were received with little gratitude by the city authorities..." (*Hymnal Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship*, by Marilyn Kay Stulken. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981; p. 543). "Now Thank We All Our God" was written by Martin Rinkart at the height of the chaos, destruction, and death of the Thirty Years' War in 1637. I believe there is wisdom for us here to learn from those who have gone before us. They call us to return and give thanks, even when that thanksgiving seems very hard to do.

No matter what life may hold for us – good or ill – for the child of God, each and every day becomes a day to return and give thanks. Thanksgiving is not just one day in late November. Regardless of our life's situation or circumstances, God's amazing gifts are there in each of our lives. If we think that it's important to say thank you to other people, how much more important it is to say thank you to God our Maker and Redeemer! And the gift of all gifts is Jesus, who took on our thanklessness and ingratitude, and died the death we rightly deserved because of our sins. In Jesus, we have been set free! Now, how will we use this freedom? Surely this blood-bought freedom must be grounded in thanksgiving.

As we go our separate ways after this worship service is over, let each of us return to give thanks to God who has blessed us beyond measure. On Thanksgiving Day, on the day after Thanksgiving, and the day after that, and so on, let us return to give thanks to God. As we strive to join Jesus on his mission, may our thanksgiving will overflow into *thanksgiving* as we do good in Jesus' Name to others.

A blessed and happy Thanksgiving to you in Jesus' Name. Amen.