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St. James', Mt. Airy  
10/9/16

Proper 23C  
Jeremiah 29:4-7  
Psalm 66:1-11  
2 Timothy 2:8-15  
Luke 17:11-19

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.  
Amen.**

*Lex orandi, lex credendi*

Roughly translated, that means: *praying shapes believing.*

Long before I learned that phrase, in Latin or English, this was something I knew by heart.

I did not grow up in a religious household, or more accurately, while there were resonances of Christianity throughout our lives and in our home, my family never went to church.

My mother grew up Roman Catholic, and my father Methodist. Outside of having my brother and I baptized in the RC Church, they didn't initially find a middle ground that worked for them both.

But then when I was in about 4th grade, I started spending the night with my best friend, Melissa Grooms, many Saturday nights. Melissa's family went to the local Episcopal Church, and so they would take me with them on Sunday mornings.

When I found the Episcopal Church, it was like coming home. The way I felt when I worshipped there, was like I was somehow the truest version of myself. And I found community – some other kids my age, yes – but also a large circle of adults who watched out for me, taught me by example, and filled in for my grandparents whom I loved, but who all lived far away.

But the best part, **the best part** was the *Book of Common Prayer* and the liturgy.

I always knew that words mattered. It's probably no shock to hear that I leaned toward the nerdy side in school, and I was both an avid reader and writer – always looking for the perfect turn of phrase or description of an image that took my breath away.

And so when I found the Eucharist, it was life changing – or perhaps better put, it was life affirming.

The 1979 Book of Common Prayer, less than a decade old when I found the church, was at the same time both an expression of deep truths I somehow already knew, and also a revelation that **shaped** what, and how, I **believed**.

Now, I didn't know this at the time, but this prayer book recovered the centrality of Baptism and Eucharist as the fundamental sacraments of Christian life and identity, and brought forth a focus on a communal rather than personal sense of piety.

This was the worship and theology that shaped me and drew me in, because whether it was something my parents instilled, or it was just my innate sense of understanding the divine, I grew to understand that my lens for the world and life was a sacramental one.

The Baptismal Covenant became for me the guiding principle for living life as a Christian, and the Great Thanksgiving – that re-remembering we enter into every week as we prepare to share communion – showed me what it meant to be faithful and live in relationship – **in communion** – with others and with God.

*The Lord be with you.*

*And also with you.*

*Lift up your hearts.*

*We lift them to the Lord.*

*Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.*

*It is right to give him thanks and praise*

*It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.<sup>1</sup>*

We pray together – back and forth – responding to each other. We offer our hearts. We give thanksgiving - and not only that - we proclaim that it is foundational to offer thanksgiving at all times and in all places.

This is what our Gospel offers us today as well.

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus encountered 10 lepers who called out to him for mercy. He told them all to go and show themselves to the priests, those who could declare that they were healed and could be restored to community.

They did as he asked, they followed his command, and on the way they found that they were made clean. Nine continued on, but one – one returned to Jesus, praising God and laying at Jesus' feet to thank him.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer, 1979: Eucharistic Prayer A, pg. 361.*

We can't know the tone of Jesus' voice as he ponders, "Were there not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?" Is he angry? sad? flabbergasted?<sup>2</sup> just plain curious?

What we do know is that for the one who returned, shouting praise and thanksgiving, he was granted **something more** – not only was he cleansed, his **faith made him well**.

What exactly does that mean? We aren't told, but human experience offers us some ideas.

As I was preparing this sermon I came across many quotes and reflections about gratitude and thankfulness, a few of which I think tell us something about **the more** that thankfulness brings:

C.S. Lewis observed, "I noticed how the humblest and at the same time most balanced minds praised the most: while the cranks, misfits, and malcontents praised least. Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible."

A.A Milne, the author of the Winnie the Pooh books wrote, "Piglet noticed that even though he had a Very Small Heart, it could hold a rather large amount of Gratitude."

And 14th century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart wrote, "If the only prayer you said was thank you, that would be enough."

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<sup>2</sup> *Feasting on the Word Year C*, Volume 4, pg. 164.

What these diverse people observed over the centuries, what the life of the one leper in the 1st century demonstrated, and indeed what our own lives reflect, is that thanksgiving is fundamental and it is transformative.

Jesus said to the leper who returned, "Get up and go on your way, your faith has made you well."

This is not only a response to the leper's thankfulness, but also a lesson about the nature of faith. In short, to 'have faith' is to live it, and to live it is to give thanks.<sup>3</sup>

As one theologian puts it, "One might almost say, in fact, that 'faith' and 'gratitude' are two words for the same thing: to practice gratitude is to practice faith. If faith is not something we have, but something we do – something we live – then in living, we express our complete trust in God."<sup>4</sup>

So how do we become people whose lives are lived in authentic thanksgiving?

For some people, thanksgiving is simply the water they swim in, it is a natural to them as breathing. I admit to being envious of them.

For others of us, we must live into Tertullian's admonition that **Christians are made, not born**. And so we must cultivate our stance of thanksgiving, building habits through holy practices – at home by ourselves and in our families, but also and always together.

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<sup>3</sup> *Feasting on the Word Year C*, Volume 4, pg. 166.

<sup>4</sup> *Feasting on the Word Year C*, Volume 4, pg. 166.

When that leper fell before Jesus and thanked him? The Greek word used for his thanksgiving in the original text was *eucharistō*. This is the word from which get Eucharist, literally a thanksgiving.

### **Praying shapes believing.**

So when we gather every week, **in thanksgiving**, it shapes us and sends us out into the world with lifted hearts and open hands. We are Eucharistic people, and our praying does indeed shape our believing – and not only that – but how we live.

Shortly after I arrived at St. James' I began using the prayer **behold what you are, become what you receive** as the invitation to communion.

A translation of a phrase from a sermon on the Eucharist by St. Augustine of Hippo, the 5th century theologian and bishop, profoundly declares a reality and then invites us to participate in it.

Gathering to share in the bread and wine, the body and blood, then, is **our** faithful response, **our** living in thanksgiving.

And it feeds us. Literally, yes, but also spiritually – giving us the sustenance we need to keep living in thanksgiving every day once we are sent out in peace to love and serve the Lord.

It is this orientation of thanksgiving that we will be holding in prayer and lifting up in the coming weeks as we are invited as individuals, as families, and as a community, to reflect on how we respond in thanksgiving for the blessings we receive from this community, and what we will pledge to support the ministry and mission of St. James' in the coming year.

Our image to consider and pray about this year are hands raised in prayer and offering, and the theme **Giving Back, Giving Forward**. If you haven't already, please pick up your envelope with pledge materials in the narthex. I hope you will consider the reasons why you give back to this community and why you give forward for all that will come next.

My prayer for us all is that we enter ever deeper into thanksgiving as a way of life. That in this church that we have found, and formed together, we respond in faith to the abundance we have been given with thankful and generous hearts.

~ AMEN ~