

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Loud Praise, Quiet Praise”

Rev. David K. Groth

Thanksgiving, 2011

Luke 17:11-19

“Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks.” Have you ever done such a thing? Have you ever experienced such a surge of sheer, happy gratitude that, at the top of your lungs you started praising God? Have you ever, without thought to what others might think, cut loose like that and thanked God with a loud voice?

I haven’t. I’ve sung loud, with full voice and heart. I’ve participated vigorously in litanies of praise. I’ve prayed fervently, giving heartfelt thanks. But I don’t think I’ve ever, like this man, just let loose with a volley of spontaneous, loud, improvised praise of God.

Maybe it’s because I’ve never had leprosy . . . or been cured of it. Or maybe it’s because I’m the son of Gene and Sue Groth and that wasn’t their style. Or maybe it’s because I’m a Lutheran, and for most of us, that’s not our style. I think it was Garrison Keillor who said, “If a Lutheran is *really* moved, you might notice his eyebrows twitch a little.” There are many who think of this as a sure sign of a spiritual problem, an impediment to true religion and true worship of God, and it’s because of our manmade church traditions.

Earlier this year a friend sent a devotion to me written by one of the pastors at the Crystal Cathedral in California. In it, he noticed how this leper praised Jesus with a loud voice and fell at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks. The devotion says, “Now *that’s* giving thanks! *That’s* giving praise!” He goes on to say, “I recently went to a sporting event in a massive stadium, and when the home team scored, the crowd went nuts. I saw men and women, young and old alike, from age 5 to 85 with their arms in the air and cheering at the top of their lungs the heroes of the day. Yet, I see many of these same faces in church on Sunday and it would literally take a crow bar to get their hands away from their sides during a time of prayer, or to sing above a whisper during a time of praise in song! We have become so immersed in our manmade church traditions that we’ve forgotten what truly being thankful is all about . . . Cut loose a little and give God the Glory! He deserves every ounce of praise you can muster.”

Well God certainly does deserve all the praise we can muster. Any way you slice it, it’s simply not right that we struggle to praise God and give him thanks and yet can yell at the T.V. praising the throw of a quarterback or the catch of a wide receiver. This leper, after all, was only given his earthly life back, and yet he praised God at the top of his lungs. We’ve been given eternal life, and yet how we struggle to be thankful.

Part of the problem is sin. I’m convinced: giving thanks is not a natural response for sinful people. And I believe it goes all the way back to the Fall. Adam and Eve wanted to be like God, right? That was their sin. And one of the things God never has to do is thank someone. It’s always the other way

around. People thank God. God doesn't thank people. So people like you and me who, because of sinful nature, don't want to have to thank anyone. It would necessarily mean we are not the self-made, self-reliant, self-sufficient, powerful demigods we want to be. So our sinful nature wars against giving thanks.

Maybe you've noticed it. Maybe you've noticed how hard it is sometimes to be grateful . . . or for others to be grateful. It's like lining up a young child before his grandmother and saying, "Say 'thank you' to Grandma. Come on now, you can do it, 'Say thank you.'" And the child cringes and buries his head in mom's skirt and starts to weep. "Come on, you can do it!" And the child digs in his heels, and you know, he really can't do it. And grandma knows it too and tries to defuse the situation and says "It's okay" and quickly changes the topic so the child is spared the awful, awful task of giving thanks. Sometimes you and I don't want to have to say thank you either and it's because we're made of the same stuff as those nine lepers. They were glad to be healed, for sure, and they knew they should probably go back to thank Jesus. But a greater part of them just longed to get on with their lives. Maybe they told themselves, "We'll look for him tomorrow, and thank him then."

Adam and Eve wanted to be like God. So do you. So do I. Therefore, it can be hard to give thanks. For the same reason, we want to be powerful because God is powerful. We want to always be in control because God is always in control. And we never want to say, "I'm sorry" because God never has to say that.

Some time ago, in a fit of frustration, (more like a tantrum) I said to Gail, "I'm forever saying, 'I'm sorry' to people and I'm just sick of it. 'I'm sorry.' 'I'm sorry.' 'I'm sorry.' Always me saying I'm sorry and no one ever saying it to me!" Deep down, Adam and Eve wanted to be like God, and so do you . . . and so do I.

Nine of the ten lepers failed to give thanks. One of them fought off his ingratitude and made his way back to Jesus and thanked God with a loud voice. But I would submit that's not the only way to give thanks, and maybe not even the best way. Did he remain grateful for the rest of his life? I'm sure he did. Did he spend the rest of his life shadowing Jesus and shouting his thanks and praise. I doubt it . . . nor would Jesus want him to. There were better things for both of them to be doing. I think that man quickly returned to the more routine rhythms of life: work, Sabbath, child rearing, caregiver for aging parents and that's good too, isn't it?

Similarly, maybe you've heard it (or thought it yourself), "If we really believed that the Lord gives us his body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins, we wouldn't process back to our seats. We'd sing and dance and shout and laugh our way back to our seats." You really think so? I don't. I believe it is his body and blood for our forgiveness and that forgiveness gives life and salvation. But that doesn't make me want to bump knuckles with anyone, or

yell my head off in praise, and it certainly doesn't make me want to dance. It makes me want to pray, privately, quietly, but sincerely, "Thank you Lord. Thank you." It was my dad's habit after communion to open up the hymnal to that prayer for after communion. "I thank and praise You for feeding me the life-giving body and blood of Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ." I have no doubt in my mind that his thanksgiving was just as genuine as that leper's, even though there was no microphone sensitive enough to pick it up. In other words, there are lots of things to feel guilty about in the world. We should feel guilty about ingratitude. We should not be made to feel guilty about quiet gratitude, or quiet praise.

There's also the danger of making a show of piety, so that we appear grateful and pious. Jesus was never much impressed with that. I'm thinking of how he reacted to the Pharisees praying in public with maximum visibility, or how they gave alms to the poor with great fanfare. I'm thinking of how Jesus reacted against those who whitened their faces to amplify the effects of fasting. I'm thinking of how he was not impressed with the wealthy heaving their great bags of coins up to the temple treasury and dumping their contents in with a loud racket. He wasn't opposed to that; it just didn't impress him all that much. They were giving out of their wealth. It wouldn't have a great impact on them. What did impress him, however, was the quiet plink of the widow's mite, because it was everything she had. It would have a great impact on her. Outward shows of piety do not deceive God. In Mark 6, Jesus said, "Isaiah was right . . . 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me'" (v. 6). Better to have with quiet, humble faith than loud shows of faith.

Three years ago at the church workers' conference, a worship leader told us to give God a big hand of applause. When we didn't perform to his liking, he scolded us, so we clapped a little louder. It was louder, but it wasn't genuine. I didn't feel praise and gratitude. I felt manipulated. It's like taking hold of dog's tail and wagging it to make him feel happy. Mostly it will just annoy the dog. I'm not convinced God needs or even wants our applause, our whooping and hollering in here or anywhere else for that matter. I think he's far more interested in genuine gratitude and praise, whatever the volume. And, of course, it's not that he needs our gratitude and praise in the first place, any more than he needs the cattle on a thousand hills. But we do need to give him thanks. We do need to praise him . . . for our own health and wellbeing.

So on this Thanksgiving, if we are to be genuine, we should put more effort into the awareness of the gifts he's given than into our response to those gifts. If we are to be genuine in gratitude and praise, we should first take the time to do an inventory of all that God has given us, and then the gratitude and praise will come quite naturally. We won't have to force anything. So, regularly, routinely, and especially when you start feeling sorry for yourself, get off of that rail and start recalling all the gifts God has given you. Start with the easy ones: family, friends, food, clothing. Then go to the next level: for

police and firemen that are willing to rush into places others are desperately trying to get out of. For beautiful stretches of weather, and when the weather turns, for that warm, dry and cozy place to sleep as the freezing rain lashes against the windows. For the Lord's angels who faithfully, secretly, watch over us. For art and music that is so beautiful it makes you want to weep. For the creatures of God that have his fingerprints all over them, beautiful, beautiful creatures great and small whom the Lord God made so carefully, thoughtfully. Thank him for all of it.

Then start a new list, and put on that list as many of those things you can remember for which he has forgiven you, all those things for which he suffered on the cross for you. For our smug hypocrisy, our false shows of piety, our shallow thanksgiving, our narcissism in a hungry world, our miserly generosity, our calloused, premeditated sin . . . he bore it all on the cross and bled for it all on the cross, and forgives it all in the sacrament, and so include it all on the list.

When you've done your homework . . . when you've taken the time to remember God's many gifts, you'll notice something. You'll be grateful. And it will have come naturally, on its own steam. You will not have forced it; you will only have jogged your memory. And you'll notice something else: where there is gratitude, it needs to find expression. Nothing can hold it back. It will be on your lips for sure, but it will also leak out of your hands, what they're doing, and your feet, where they take you. It will show up in your quiet prayers. It will show up in your singing of the hymns and songs. Thanksgiving will also show up in your own quiet, anonymous acts of service done for others. Gratitude to God will make you want to tithe. It will also make you want to leave behind a generous tip to the anonymous immigrant who cleaned your hotel room, the waitress who served your food, the carrier who delivers your newspapers. The Spirit of thanksgiving will fuel your efforts to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with your God. Thanksgiving for God's forgiveness will make you want to forgive others. Thanksgiving for God's love will make you want to pray for your enemies. Thanksgiving for God's compassion will make you want to visit the sick and befriend the lonely and welcome the stranger. Thanks giving for God's peace will make you want to share his peace.

There are many ways to give thanks. Don't ever feel you have to do it in the way someone else prescribes for you.

Finally, there may be times when you want to do it with a loud voice. Don't hold back. But also, don't feel guilty about those in-between times, when the praise and gratitude is no longer giddy and loud, but quiet and reflective. Don't feel guilty about that, because that's just as good. In fact, loud praise might last for a few moments but it doesn't get much done. Quiet praise, quiet thanksgiving, will carry you through a life time and it will bring the living Christ to your neighbor. Amen.