

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.

I promise I'm not jumping ahead in the service, but please play along.

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.¹

Every Sunday we pray this prayer at the beginning of the Eucharistic prayer. Called the *sursum corda* (Latin for “lift up your hearts” or literally “lifted hearts”), it is the opening dialogue to the seasonal Proper Preface of the Eucharistic Prayer. It dates back to at least the third century and is recorded in the earliest liturgies of the Christian Church.

It is a prayer we pray, back and forth, responding to one another. We offer our hearts, and we give thanksgiving, and not only that, we proclaim that it is foundational to offer thanksgiving at all times and in all places – which is fitting considering the meaning of the word eucharist.

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979: Eucharistic Prayer A, pg. 361.

Eucharist is based on the ecclesiastical Greek *eukharistia* “thanksgiving”, which came from the Greek *eukharistos* “grateful”, made up of the parts *eu* meaning “well” + kharizesthai to “offer graciously” (from *kharis* “grace”).

We’re building up a list of words and images here – lifted hearts, thanksgiving, grateful, well, grace. They all fit into our Gospel reading today, and here are two more: return and praise.

These last two combine to create what is a common icon for living a faithful life in Luke’s Gospel: “returning and praising God.” In the Christmas story, for example, the shepherds “returned (*hypostrepho*), glorifying (*doxazo*) and praising God for all they had heard and seen” (Luke 2:20). And at the Gospel’s end, after witnessing Jesus’ ascension, the disciples “worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the Temple blessing God” (Luke 24:52).²

We see return and praise, then, in the beginning, at the end, and all the way through – like in our reading from Luke today.

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus encountered 10 lepers who called out to him for mercy and healing. 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 followed his command, trusting him, and on the way they found that they were made clean. Nine continued on, but one – one returned to Jesus shouting praise and thanksgiving. And he, he was granted something more – not only was he cleansed, his “faith made him well.”

² Salt Project Lectionary Commentary for Proper 23.

What was it, precisely, that Jesus celebrated about the man's faith here, that he gave him the further gift of being made well? It wasn't about trusting in Jesus, for all ten called him "Master." It wasn't about obeying his instruction, for all ten did what he commanded, setting out toward the priests to be officially reconciled to the community.³ So, if not trust and not obedience, what was it? What was different?

The one man boldly disobeyed Jesus' instruction, and instead returned, praised God, and gave thanks.

It is a parallel to the parable of the Good Samaritan, which dramatized what it looks like to follow the second dimension of the great commandment, loving "your neighbor as yourself." But today's story shows what it looks like to follow the great commandment's first dimension: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind."⁴

What does loving God, in this, way look like? It looks like thanking and praising God for being the One from whom all blessings flow. All ten in the group believed in Jesus' power and obeyed his command; all ten were blessedly restored. But the act of thanksgiving deepened and completed the act of receiving the blessing.⁵

It's like when someone gives you a gift. The gift is now yours either way, but what happens when you say thank you? It becomes something more. You complete the circle, creating relationship and mutuality and love. It's like the 14th century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart wrote, "If the only prayer you said was thank you, that would be enough."

³ Salt Project Lectionary Commentary for Proper 23.

⁴ Salt Project Lectionary Commentary for Proper 23.

⁵ Salt Project Lectionary Commentary for Proper 23.

Gratitude is the natural echo of grace received.⁶

And it puts thanksgiving central to the life of faith – kind of like we put it central in our worship.

When we gather here every week, in thanksgiving, it shapes us and sends us out into the world with lifted hearts and open hands. We are Eucharistic people.

Behold what you are, become what you receive. These words we often use as an invitation to receive the bread and the wine evoke that deep truth.

They are a translation of a phrase from a sermon on the Eucharist written by St. Augustine of Hippo, the 5th century theologian and bishop, and they profoundly declare a reality – and then invite us to participate in it. *Behold what you are* – a gift of God; *become what you receive* – live a life of thanksgiving.

Returning here each week to worship and praise God, and gathering to share in the bread and wine, 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, after being sent out in peace to love and serve the Lord.

It is this orientation of thanksgiving that we lift up during stewardship season 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 – adding our stars reflecting on how St. James' shines its light on us – and then deciding what we will pledge to support the ministry and mission of St. James' in the coming year.

⁶ Salt Project Lectionary Commentary for Proper 23.

My prayer is that we enter ever deeper into thanksgiving as a way of life, and that we respond in faith with thankful and generous hearts.

~ Amen ~