

**JANUARY 15, 2012 HOMILY  
AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH**

**“WHERE ARE THE NINE?”**

In our gospel reading this morning from Luke 17, our Lord Jesus Christ heals 10 lepers of their horrible disease---but only one comes back to say “thank you” to the Lord. The other 9 had nothing to say! The health rules of the Old Testament say that if someone thinks they are healed by leprosy they first, due to the contagious nature of the disease, have to go to a priest and be examined and hopefully certified as indeed being healed and able to return to normal life in society. The way this story happened is that the 10 lepers asked Jesus to heal them. He told them to go the priest to be examined. And as they were walking to see the priest, they were all healed. The priest examined them and declared them healed. This was the point where nine just disappeared and only one went back to Jesus to thank Him.

Father Anthony Coniaris, in one of his many books (Message of Sunday Gospel Readings, Vol. I, Light & Life Publishing, p. 113), imagines that a newspaper reporter was present that day and asked each one of the 9 why he didn't go back to give thanks. Here is how each responded to the reporter's question---“Why didn't you go and give thanks to Jesus?”

Former leper #1---“Why thank him? Isn't that his job to heal people?”

Former leper #2---“I'm just too shy....”

Former leper #3---“I'm not sure it's a miracle...maybe it's just coincidence.”

Former leper #4---“Jesus got lots of good publicity from this miracle---no need for me to thank him.”

Former leper #5---“No time...I'm late for an appointment.”

Former leper #6---“I hate feeling obligated to anyone; if I went back to thank him, I would have felt obliged to him.”

Former leper #7---“I didn't go back because I thought he might ask for a donation.”

Former leper #8---“I just got lazy....”

Former leper #9---“Whoops! I forgot!”

Whatever excuse those 9 had, there really *was* no excuse! In fact, the Lord seems shocked that they didn't come back to even just say “thanks”. He healed 10, and only 1 came back? As Christ said in Verse 17---“Were not ten healed? Where are the nine?”

Where are the nine? Hopefully, not among us here today! Hopefully, none of us are that ungrateful to God. Hopefully, we don't take God's goodness to us for granted. When we think of all that God does for us, how could we take it for granted? Yet sometimes we do. And is it really that hard to say “Thank you”?

Well, some times it is hard. If life gets tough, it gets tougher to say “thank you” to God. If you're sick or lonely or out of work or something else is going way wrong, it can be hard to be thankful. But even if things do get tough, we still do have the presence of God with us to be thankful for. And sometimes it takes tough times to get us to draw closer to God.

St. Nikolai Velimirovich was one of our 20<sup>th</sup> century Orthodox Saints. A genius of a man, a very holy man, he was one of the leading bishops in Serbia, although not the Patriarch of that land. His holiness, his teaching, his many books gave him great influence in that country. During World War II Hitler attacked Serbia (then part of Yugoslavia) when the nation refused

to be his ally. And then the puppet government that the Nazis set up tried to get St. Nikolai to cooperate with them and to influence the other Serbs to stop them from rebelling against German rule. The Saint refused to cooperate and so he was arrested. Eventually he was sent to the famous German concentration camp of Dachau where many thousands were brutally killed. St. Nikolai survived Dachau but went through great suffering in that horrible hellhole. And yet it was at Dachau that he drew the closest ever to God. Later in life, looking back, he wrote that, "if it were possible, I would give the remainder of my life for one hour in Dachau." (in The New Chrysostom; Bishop Nikolaj Velimirovich, St. Tikhon Seminary Press, 2011, p. 65)

When things go bad (and Dachau was pretty bad!) we can just complain and feel sorry for ourselves. Or we can realize that even the hardest times can be of benefit to us---that it might be now that we come to know God better. Even the worst times can be a blessing.

And one more thing to remember when things are tough and we feel like complaining----remember, it could be worse! Even in our worse situations, even if we can't think of anything about the situation to thank God for, we should remember----it could be worse!

In the Jewish tradition there is an old story about a man going to his rabbi for some advice. This man was poor and lived in a tiny little house. And the house was very crowded---there was his wife, his own children, his mother-in-law, his own parents, and a couple of cousins thrown in---and the house really wasn't much bigger than a hut. He told the rabbi, "I'm going crazy! It's so crowded and I can't take it any more. What can I do? Can you please give me some advice, Rabbi?" The rabbi said, "Do you have any farm animals?" "Yes, we have a goat", replied the poor fellow. The rabbi said, "Move your goat into your house." The man replied, "Have you taken leave of your senses, Rabbi? How can moving a goat into the house help my overcrowding problem? That's crazy." The rabbi replied, "You wanted advice, I'm giving you advice. Move the goat in. And come back in a week to tell me how things are going." The man walked home muttering nasty things about the rabbi, but in his despair he decided to move the goat in. A week later he walked back over to the rabbi's home. The rabbi asked, "Well, how are things going at home now that the goat is living inside with you?" "Rabbi," the man answered, "it's so much worse, I'm really going crazy now! The goat stinks, he steals our food, he takes up a lot of room! It's so horrible that we can't take it any more!" The rabbi said, "Some more advice for you...." The man replied, "Just what I need! More of your ridiculous advice!" The rabbi said, "Here's my next point of advice---go home and move the goat back outside and come back to me in a week." The man obeyed the rabbi again and moved the goat back outside. Then a week later he returned to the rabbi. The rabbi said, "How is it going at home now that you've moved the goat out?" The man said, "Rabbi, it's just wonderful now! That stinky, huge, miserable animal is back outside----and now we have so much room and we're all so happy! The house seems so much bigger now!"

Are you going through a rough patch in life? Maybe lots of rough patches? Well, you know it could be worse. Remember the goat!

Our Lord healed 10 lepers, but only one came back to thank Him. So Christ asked, "Where are the nine?" Where are the nine---the nine who didn't even bother to say "thanks". Hopefully, not here among us. Whether we're going through hard times or good times, there are always things to give thanks to God for. Let me share with you some beautiful words about giving thanks to God that were first spoken by St. Cosmas Aitolos. (*And before I quote him, let me assure you that St. Cosmas wasn't some person who had an easy relaxing life, a life*

*easy to be thankful for. He lived in Greece in the 1700s when it was under Turkish Moslem rule and he went from village to village persuading Greeks to not give in to Moslem pressure and leave Christ for Islam. It was a very difficult life and he was finally hung by the Turks--- not an easy life, indeed!)*

The words of St. Cosmas about what we have to thank God for-----**“He has given us such a large earth to live in.....so many thousands of plants, springs, rivers, the sea, the air, day, night, the sky, the sun, etc. For whom did He create all of these if not for us? What did he owe us? Nothing. They are all gifts. He made us human beings....in His own image. Although we sin thousands of times an hour He has compassion on us like a father, and He doesn’t put us to death and place us in hell. But He awaits our repentance with open arms....so that He will embrace us to put us in paradise to rejoice forever. Now, shouldn’t we love this sweetest God and Master?”**

Yes, we should love this sweetest God and Master. Yes, and we should always thank this sweetest God and Master.

Our Lord healed ten, but where were the nine when it was time to thank the Lord? Let us not be like those nine, but instead be like the one who came back to thank Christ.

Just a few minutes from now in the liturgy, one of the key sung exchanges between priest and people takes place at the beginning of the Anaphora section of the service. The priest comes out from the altar, lifts up his hands to God, and sings, “Let us lift up our hearts.” And the people sing back to him, “We lift them up to the Lord.” Then the priest bows to the icon of Jesus Christ and sings, “Let us give thanks unto the Lord.”

Let us at that holy moment truly give thanks unto the Lord. And let us continue to do so each day and every hour.

