**Luke 17:11-19 November 27, 2019 (Thanksgiving Eve Service)**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

What is the first thing you think of, when it comes to Thanksgiving? Is it the meal? The pilgrims and Native Americans sitting down to eat? Is it just the day before the Black Friday shopping begins? It seems that the dash toward Christmas shopping has been pushed earlier and earlier, it began with midnight of Black Friday, then the evening of Thanksgiving, currently it seems to be sitting somewhere in the afternoon on Thanksgiving that you can begin hitting the sales, and in the future who knows if that time will continue to be pushed forward. While that may cut into the day of Thanksgiving itself it isn’t necessarily the biggest threat to our celebration of Thanksgiving here in the church. This isn’t necessarily a theological holiday that ties into the life of Jesus Christ like Christmas and Easter, but the church ties together two things when it comes to thanksgiving, and if you look at the words of the thanksgiving hymns you will see this theme repeated. This particular section of hymns start with hymn 892 and goes to hymn 895 in the Lutheran Service Book that is in the pew before you. It ties together harvest and thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving is a time for us in the church to reflect upon the harvest and where it came from. This shouldn’t be that surprising, a number of churches in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod are in rural areas where farming is the main occupation. The harvest is the high point of the entire year for a farmer, it’s the culmination of all of the work that they did in planting and reaping, and now that the harvest is finally in it’s a time of celebration, to give thanks to the Lord for the gift of the harvest and prepare for the winter months. Thanksgiving itself wouldn’t be possible without the tireless efforts of farmers and ranchers, of those who care for the turkey, grow the potatoes and corn and wheat and carrots and pumpkins and the list goes on and on. We give thanks to God for the literal harvest of crops, but that’s not the only harvest that these hymns are talking about.

Look at hymn 893, “Sing to the Lord of Harvest.” In the first 2 verses and even the first half of verse 3 it’s talking about the rain falling to allow crops to grow and the golden sheaves we bring to his altar, but it also speaks about how we bring “the souls Christ died to save.” How we “lay our hearts before Him and fall at his feet” in thanksgiving. He is the Lord of the harvest of crops, and also the Lord of the harvest of souls. The harvest of people who are his own possession.

Our Old Testament lesson shows us pictures of the bountiful harvest that was to come for God’s people in the promised land, “a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing out in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you will eat bread without scarcity.” A land that was suitable for growing, and where a variety of foods would be harvested, a land of plenty, and in many ways, a land that matches the description of the land that we live in today. While we look to the needs of others, and don’t discount there are those who need fruits of the earthly harvest in our communities, that may not be our reality, as we sit down tomorrow to feast sumptuously with family and friends.

But what about the second harvest? While the physical needs of our bodies may be taken care of and then some, what about the needs of our souls? Are they fed with God’s Word? Do we feast sumptuously on the food that is needed for our faith? Or is it then that we eat in scarcity and moderation? And what about our friends and family? Has a time of thanksgiving directed to God for all of the gifts that he’s given become a tradition that has fallen away? God’s desire for the harvest is defined in our Epistle lesson for this evening from 1 Timothy chapter 2, “God our Savior desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” A perfect harvest would be exactly what God desires, that all would receive the seed of the Word of God, the seed that would sprout to full faith and that they would be saved and harvested into the barns of his kingdom. To be his possession. But look around you. Is that the reality of the sowing of His Word? I’m not an expert farmer, I didn’t grow up in a family that raised animals or owned land to farm, but even I know that if there is snow on the ground and the corn is still in the field, it’s not a good sign for the harvest. Look at our world today, at the statistics that talk about church attendance and family involvement, of the number of children being born and raised in the church. How is the harvest looking when Christ returns?

Jesus himself faced this reality in our Gospel lesson, upon healing the 10 lepers, only one returns to give him any thanks. “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine?” Not a very good harvest. This reminds me of my own gardening experiences, my wife and I dabbled a bit in Kansas and to be honest we were able to enjoy some of the harvest of tomatoes, sweet corn, green peppers and other seeds that we planted, but the majority of the time we were left with the same kind of questions. “What went wrong? Did we not plant the seed, water it, weed around it? Everything is set up perfectly for it to grow, we planted 6 tomato plants, we planted 3 lanes of sweet corn, why do we only see one growing of each? What’s the problem? It’s what we ask in our lives, it’s what Jesus asks here in our Gospel lesson. Sin. The parable of the sower gives a clue as to what happens to the seed of faith in our hearts and those around us. Some seed gets eaten by the birds, the predators who come and prey on us. Those predators, the demons and Satan still exist today, and are still very much at work. Some seed is choked by the weeds, the distractions, the business, the other things that take away from the truth. We see this with Thanksgiving, with seeking to buy more for the upcoming holiday, than to take a moment and give thanks specifically to God for what he has blessed us with. But God calls us to spread the Word, because it will grow in His time and in accordance to His will. Just as we see in the leper who returns.

Jesus says, “Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” A harsh criticism to the Jews who would look down on the Samaritans thinking they couldn’t possibly do anything right, and here is one who rightly returns thanks to Jesus Christ. It shows that God is at work in our hearts and we shouldn’t ever count out the power of His Word. We sow the seed no matter what. Some of the most successful vegetables we ever grew were what was considered “volunteer”, meaning that we didn’t go about the work of planting them carefully and cultivating and micromanaging their growth. One year we had a great harvest of volunteer pumpkins that grew in our garden area because we had thrown the previous year’s jack o lanterns from Halloween there. The work of growing the seed of faith is done by the Holy Spirit and we give God thanks for any seed that grows, because it leads to the harvest being plentiful in God’s kingdom.

We are the harvest, we who are gathered here in God’s house to give him thanks, and we should see ourselves as God’s very own possession, but the potential for harvest, for the growing of seed in our friends, our neighbors, our family, and our world is plentiful. That harvest is plentiful in that we bring a word of hope and the love of God to a world that is hurting and constantly asking, “What’s the problem?” The best definition of what it means to be God’s harvest is found in the last verse of our final hymn this evening 892, Come Ye Thankful People Come. “Even so Lord, quickly come, to they final harvest home; Gather Thou Thy people in, free from sorrow, free from sin, there forever purified, in thy garner to abide, come with all thine angels come, raise the glorious harvest home.” You as God’s own creation, fed with the nutrients of His Word, grown by Him alone through His love for you, can look forward to the day when he gathers you in, to a place free from sorrow, sin and pain, to be purified, cleaned, separated from the weeds of sin and death, and safely placed into His kingdom, the final harvest home. You are His own, you are saved by His work, by the work of the very Son of God who healed 10 lepers and alleviated human illness to show his ultimate love and care when he died on the cross to save you from the ultimate threat of your salvation and eternal life, when he died to take away the cause of all problems in this world: sin.

So give thanks, specifically, intentionally, directed to God the provider for all that you have. Give thanks to God for the harvest that provides you a meal to eat. Give thanks to God for the family and friends that you have to eat it with. Give thanks to God for a country that provides you the freedom to eat and live and worship Him in peace. Give thanks to God that you are his very own, his harvest that he will take home soon.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.