Text: Psalm 50, Luke 17:11-19, Cain and Abel

**Introduction**

We as Lutherans rightly gather around Luther’s small catechism. And for Thanksgiving we’d usually reach for Luther’s explanation to the first article of the creed. His explanation of providence. “…He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life…”. But Luther’s catechism isn’t the only one that contains wisdom. Don’t tell my circuit visitor, but I’ve always had a soft spot for at least the beginning of the Westminster Catechism. It opens with the question What is the chief end of man? And it gives as it’s response: Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

Our first and primary relationship, duty, orientation, end…is toward God. Augustine would say, “our hearts are restless until they rest in you”. Jesus summarizes the first commandment as, “Love the Lord you God with all your heart.” This is what we were made to do. Of course we’ve been running from that since the garden.

**Glory Story**

And fundamentally there are two stories that we can tell. We can tell glory stories, or we can tell grace stories. And I believe that even though American Thanksgiving is a secular holiday, it reflects the grace story.

If we tell the glory story, it is always “we deserve the glory because we have done something worthy.” We deserve the feast, because of how hard we worked. We deserve the recognition because of how good our work was. We deserve everything we have because we are the good people. And the glory story can even creep into the religious life. Cain – of Cain and Abel - thought his offering deserved the same praise as Abel’s. And that little story is always something of a mystery because it never really explains why God rejects Cain’s and accepts Abel’s sacrifice. Over the millennia we’ve supplied reasons, but the text itself is ambiguous. God merely says, “If you do well, will you not be accepted?” Which is not an answer, because Cain thought he had done well. He made the offering. He deserved the praise.

Psalm 50 and the 10 Lepers I think are explanations or meditations on the problems with the glory story. In Psalm 50 God say to Israel, “Not for you sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me.” The Law says that a cleansed leper is to show themselves to the priest to be declared clean. And that is what Jesus tells the 10 lepers to do. Cain, Israel, the Lepers were all doing what the law demands. And if we are following the glory story, they deserved praise for that. Then we deserve something from God.

**Grace Story**

But what does it mean to do well – God’s statement to Cain?

Psalm 50 gives an answer. “Offer to God the sacrifice of thanksgiving…call upon m in the day of trouble and I shall deliver you, and you shall glorify me.” The glorification of God is not done by rote sacrifice. You can have two people fulfilling their vows and one is accepted and the other not. One glorifies God, and the other seeks to glorify – tell a glory story – about themselves. Psalm 50 ends saying “the one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me, to the one who orders his way rightly, I will show the salvation of God.”

All ten lepers were going to perform the right vows. Only one ordered his way rightly.

He ordered his way according to the grace story.

The providence of God falls on the just and the unjust alike. The unjust tell glory stories about it. I did the work and deserve the pay. The just recognize the salvation of God.

The Salvation of God is proclaimed to all men. As they went they were cleansed. God so loved the world that he gave his only son. Like the providence of God, this salvation is profligate. The seed is sown everywhere. It falls on hard ground and good soil and everything in between.

And paradoxically it is often those furthest away, those who might not know, the Samaritan, who recognizes the right order. Who don’t tell a glory story of deserving what has happened to them. But receive a grace story…receive the salvation of God. “Were not 10 cleansed? Where are the 9? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”

The response in the glory story is I deserve it. And if I don’t get it, anger crouches at the door.

The response of the grace story is thanksgiving. “when he saw that he was healed, he turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks.”

It is the salvation of God to see all that he has done for us while we were undeserving. It is that salvation of God to know that all our lives he is near us. Near enough to save. It is the salvation of God to know that he has blessed us from our mother’s arms and all along the way with countless gifts of love. It is the salvation of God to know that our sacrifices are not a duty, but a thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving is an ordering our way rightly. Thanksgiving glorifies God who keeps us in his grace. And that is what we were made to do.