

Thomas R. Cook  
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota  
9:00 and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist  
The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost – October 9, 2016

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“You are Welcome”

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Scripture: Luke 17: 11-19

Note: Preached on the Sunday of the baptism of Leighton Rose Rogers (11:00 service).

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So my formation in the Episcopal Church in Mobile, Alabama where I first served as a priest was certainly what I would call more “formal.” It wasn’t “high church” as we Episcopalians may call it, with all the ceremonies and rituals and bells, but there was a certain *decorum* expected of those who walked through the big doors in the back of the nave. Maybe it was more a “southern” thing than anything else, but that air of formality was a part of all we did on a Sunday. Before the service began, greetings were polite but brief as people scurried to their pews to kneel dutifully in private prayer before the service began. And as the priest, I was greeted at the rear doors warmly yet formally. Lots of people addressed me as “Father”, many as “Sir”, and at least one who would call me nothing but “Mr. Cook” before she had received Holy Communion that morning. At coffee hour, I was “Tom”, but not before. And I remember being instructed by more than one of our members (who liked to tell the priest what to do) that I was to deliver the bread of Holy Communion to the congregation with a certain severity, a certain dignity that eliminated the personal experience and assured that all things remained proper and holy. I was not to look

into the face of the individual, nor was I to call them by name when delivering the bread, rather I was to dutifully deliver the host into the waiting palm of the communicant with only the words from the rubrics in the *Book of Common Prayer*: “The body of Christ, the bread of heaven.” And apparently they were to look down, dour and serious, because that is what many of them did, and then they would respond “Amen”, and the transaction was complete, and we had done our weekly duty as priest and parishioner.

Now, let me tell you all little about my experience with St. Stephen’s Church. Moving beyond the sometimes raucous, nearly always friendly greetings at the rear of the nave, the camaraderie amongst ushers, greeters, and those entering for worship, the check-ins with friends and families, the last minute entrances and the rush to the pews before the procession begins, I have been enormously surprised and frankly humbled and moved by the number of people who, upon receiving the bread of Holy Communion from my hand, hearing the words, “The Body of Christ, the bread of Heaven”, often look directly into my eyes, smile, and say not only “Amen”, but “thank you.” And I am truly moved. And I know in truth I have done so little. And I take to heart what Jesus said in last weeks reading from Luke’s gospel, *I’m just a servant who has done what I am supposed to do*. Yet the relative joy in this congregation, the thankfulness, and sense of community can be so obvious. And I know that any given Sunday, individuals in this place are carrying heavy loads, grieving earnest losses,

wrestling with real problems, yet the overall sense of community, the hopefulness expressed in prayer, and the number of times I hear the words “thank you” is just plain uplifting, as I would hope it would be when the community of faith in Jesus comes together Sunday by Sunday. There are indeed many things with which to be thankful in this faith community, and I love it when I hear it and when I feel it. Because I believe that at the root of all things spiritually healthy lies the foundation of gratitude that comes with the understanding that we are a people called by God, loved by God, forgiven by God, and saved by God. I believe that earnest gratitude will always form the healthy and faithful church more than duty, more than fear, more than religion. Gratitude opens the heart, motivates our spirit to encounter THE Spirit, and lets us reach out to others in ways that makes life better for all. When I hear “thank you”, I am healed, relieved, appreciated, and appreciative, and I too am thankful.

No wonder that Jesus was so moved by the man, the former leper, the Samaritan outcast who returned to him to offer thanks for healing him of his disease. And it’s no wonder to me that while Jesus may have granted the healing, he declared that it was the man’s faith that made him well. And no wonder Jesus struggled with the disappearance of the other nine who were healed. Perhaps some didn’t feel so grateful as they felt entitled to their healing; perhaps some just were so excited they

went on their way. But it is clear to me that Jesus both noticed and appreciated the one who returned to say “thank you.”

I know you often bear heavy burdens. I know there are things from which you would be healed. But I hope and I encourage that you continually seek for those things for which to be grateful, so that you might build that foundation for hope and healing. I hope you remain thankful in your faith, knowing that Jesus offers us forgiveness, wellness of Spirit, and a love and peace that surpasses all understanding.

Now, just so we have everything in order and appropriate... I am not asking you to tell me “thank you” when I give you the bread of Holy Communion. I’m not asking you to believe that I have done any more than I have been called to do, that I deserve any particular praise for carrying out my responsibility. I’m not encouraging you to break the rubrics of the *Book of Common Prayer*. The appropriate response at Communion is “Amen.” But if a “thank you” just happens to escape your lips, I will take it as a sign of wellness, an expression of gratitude, an appreciation for the ministry you receive and carry out in Christ’s name as a part of St. Stephen’s Church, as a thanks rooted in our shared hope in Jesus Christ, who is caring for us and healing us and welcoming us to his table. Should we not return time and again and offer our thanks together, just as the Samaritan offered thanks in recognition of what Jesus had done for him? (Should we not constantly be at work welcoming people into the faith community, just as we welcome Leighton Rose Rogers and her family in Baptism

today?) I hope we always will be about this work. And when you say thank you, and when you hear me say in return, “You’re welcome”, it is not only an expression of my appreciation for you, but it is also a statement of the faith we hold as a church: You are welcome. All of us are indeed welcome.