



Mercy forever.

Lenten Sermon Five

The Spirit Anointed Christ for Mercy – Lenten Worship Series

The Spirit Anointed Christ . . . to Recover the Sight of the Blind

Based on Luke 4:18–19

“I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” We love to sing it don’t we? The old hymn expresses a spiritual truth for us; that we were spiritually blind.

We say it in our catechism classes: Man by nature is spiritually blind, dead, and an enemy of God, and that is why the Holy Spirit has to call us, has to enlighten us, has to gather us. That is why we need the means of grace of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, because we cannot do, believe, or even come to God alone.

But what would it be like to be blind? I was once caught in a mine in a remote area with all kinds of dangerous things around me. There was a drop off of about 40 feet straight down off to my left. There was a very dangerous rockslide area to my right about 20 feet away. The way out was through a little, winding tunnel that led to a rope ladder that would take me to the main tunnel. I was running a drill when I noticed things were growing dim. All of the sudden my light went out, and I was in complete darkness. We would find out later that I had not connected the light properly to the power source the night before so it was only partially charged. I sat there unable to move for what seemed like hours. Literally unable to see my hand in front of my face, my brain started filling in visual cues that my eyes were not supplying — and it was terrifying. Just when I made up my mind to set off in the direction where I thought I would find the main tunnel and feel my way out, my shift boss came to the rescue. Happily I didn’t go the way I was planning or I would have fallen and probably been killed. It was one of several times that my shift boss would say to me, “Preacher, Jesus had better help you because you sure as hell can’t help yourself.” Good theology and a lot of sermon material there. The point is that we can only imagine what it is like to be blind, and the times in our life when we sighted people can’t see are horrible.

Blindness was a common thing in Jesus’ day, and it is no wonder so many examples of healing this affliction are cited. One of these cases centers on a man born blind (John 9:1–41). The other instances may have been healings of those who lost their sight by means of disease. For example, blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46–52) or the two blind men in Jericho (Matt. 20:29–34) seem to be the healings of people who were able to see at least at one time. This definitely is the case when Jesus healed the blind man of Bethsaida who, after Jesus spit on the man’s eyes, said, “I see people; they look like trees walking around.” After Jesus touched his eyes again, the man’s sight was fully restored (Mark 8:22–26). What would it be like to have the use of your eyes and then to lose it?

The New Testament perception of the cause of disease is much more clearly elucidated than in the Old Testament. The origin of disease is linked with the activity of Satan and the bondage of his evil kingdom. Human sin is certainly involved in sickness, but more in the sense that it is allied to Satanic activity that brings disorder to God’s earth. In the mind of Jesus — those who were blind and lame, those who lived in the excruciating pain of febrile disease, those whose spirits were possessed by demons — were the victims of

an enemy whose goal was to frustrate and destroy God's handiwork.¹

The enemy who stands behind sin and disease is Satan, whom Jesus described as the "the father of lies" (John 8:44). According to one of my old professors, Martin Scharlemann:

Disease is not part of God's creative intent for man. . . . But men fell prey to another rule, the tyranny of the Evil One. Jesus came to destroy the works of this alien power, to bind the strong man, as He himself put it (Mark 3:27). The battle was joined also along the front of disease and suffering. To the task of overwhelming the kingdom of darkness belonged the job of restoring the whole man to a full relationship with God.²

In Jesus' day there was a popular notion among the Jews that any instance of sickness was the direct consequence of some particular sin. A part of this belief, this *retribution theory of disease* was the idea that those who were sick were greater sinners than those who were not. Jesus attacked this rigid teaching, while at the same time recognizing that sin is the fundamental evil by which people are shackled and bound.

The most explicit New Testament example of this dogma is in God's Word:

John 9:1–7. ¹Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. ²And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"
³Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him. ⁴I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."
⁶When He had said these things, He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay. ⁷And He said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" [which is translated, "sent"]. So he went and washed, and came back seeing, and then used this miracle to point out the irony of spiritual blindness.

John 9:39–41. ³⁹And Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind."

⁴⁰Then some of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these words, and said to Him, "Are we blind also?"

⁴¹Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We see.' Therefore your sin remains.

In John 9:2–3. Jesus categorically denied that the man's blindness was due to any specific sin or that he was a greater sinner than other. He also denied that those Galileans massacred by Pilate were sinners above all other Galileans because they suffered these things.

Luke 13: 2–5 On this last occasion he said to the crowd, "But unless you repent, you too will perish."

Jesus was trying to turn people from focusing on the sins of others to reflecting on their own sins.

¹ Garth Ludwig, *Order Restored*, (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1999), 99.

² Martin Scharlemann, *Healing and Redemption*, (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1965), 84

Repentance of sins was not the special need of sick people. Repentance was everyone's problem, whether healthy or sick.³ Think of all the sick who came to Jesus and cried out for help. Go home tonight and look through the Gospels and look at the crowds, individuals, and all the examples of healing. You will *never* find Jesus demanding that a sick person repent before being healed, *never*. Look up the word *repent* and you will see that when Jesus calls for repentance He calls for everyone to repent, especially the well off and those satisfied with themselves. When the sick, poor, or needy come to Jesus, He is all mercy and compassion.

Here is our problem. In a day in which we want to spiritualize everything, do we see the things Jesus was anointed to fix in mercy as "spiritual problems?" I heard someone on the radio the other day talking about the Bible and religion and saying that too many people want to read the Bible as if it were not spiritual and is, instead, factual. A comedian on TV the other night said Christians who believe in the seven day creation and don't believe in evolution, "watch the Flintstones as if it were a documentary." He went on to say that, as a Jew, he would like to convince his Christian friends that the books of Moses are meant to convey spiritual truths. Have we fallen into the trap that sees Jesus only as a spiritual leader? In other words, when we read the words of the lesson we are focusing on during this Lenten service, many would raise the question: Are these the literal blind, whose eyes and optic nerves no longer function or the figurative blind, who fail to see the truth? Well of course it is not an either/or comparison, it is more of a both/and relationship. Jesus *did* literally heal blind eyes. I think of blind Bartimaeus sitting by the roadside begging (Mark 10:46) or the man who was born blind and healed after he washed off the mud and spittle Jesus put on his eyes (John 9:1–8). Some disciples of John the Baptist, who was now in prison, came to Jesus with the question, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Luke 7:20–22 records Jesus' response: "At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, 'Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.'"

The messengers were to take word back to John the Baptist that Jesus did the works the Messiah was supposed to do when He came. Blind literally seeing. Lame literally walking. Lepers literally having whole, clean skin. Deaf literally hearing. Dead literally rising. And good news being proclaimed to the literal poor.

But is there a spiritual dimension as well? Of course! In the Gospel of John, especially, we see Him moving from physical bread to spiritual bread (John 6) and from physical water to spiritual water (John 4). Jesus intended the Scripture from Isaiah He read in the Nazareth synagogue to include both healing of physical blindness and spiritual blindness. Sometimes I think that we want everything to be spiritual, and we forget that Jesus came in a real body, died a real death, shed real blood, and did it for real people.

So what is the commission we have? What is our job as the followers of the merciful Christ who was anointed for mercy? Simply put, it is to be merciful, too. It is to help people see Christ and His truth clearly, to proclaim His mercy in such a way that the people of our own generation can understand. It is to dispense the means of grace in such a way that people recognize their spiritual darkness and blindness, and that Christ is the light. It is to bear witness in such a way that Christ is brought to the world and a message of

3 I am indebted in this entire section to Garth Ludwig, *Order Restored*, (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1999), 96, 98, 99.

peace through the blood of His cross is understood. We preach Christ crucified. His death on the cross, His bleeding and dying, was the ultimate act of mercy for poor, blind, lost, and condemned creatures like us.

But our commission is also to seek to help, and if possible, to heal the physically blind. Some do this through medicine. Some do this through the mercy arm of the church, LCMS World Relief and Human Care and its programs, to help blind people, to prevent blindness, and to minister to those who are blind. However we are gifted, let us not be satisfied to see people remain in their blindness, but seek the gift of sight for them. Some spend hours poking little holes in sheets of paper turning our sighted world's letters and words into raised bumps on a page so that the blind can read Braille. They do it because they were once blind; but now they see. And what they see is the merciful Christ dying on a cross to make us His own, to take our sins upon Himself and to make us a merciful people. We dedicate ourselves anew to hear the Words of our anointed Prophet who continues to preach the condemning Law and the merciful Gospel through the church; to praise our anointed Priest who sacrificed Himself on that cross and intercedes before the throne of God; to honor our anointed King who reigns over a Kingdom of mercy and wants that Kingdom of power to be a place of mercy, too. Let us think long on this: We can have faith in Christ as savior, and we can be destined by His grace to eternal life; but, we can be "ineffective and unproductive" in our faith without mercy and compassion (what He calls brotherly kindness). Listen to the words of Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 1:5–9).

⁵For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. ⁸For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.

Let's not be nearsighted and blind. Let's do the work of mercy. Let's add to the faith we have in our merciful anointed one the works that He would have us do for His sake and in His name.

Amen.