



Mercy forever.

Maundy Thursday Sermon

The Spirit Anointed Christ for Mercy – Lenten Worship Series

Based on Luke 4:18–19

I used to see him frequently during shut-in visits. Each time it would get a little worse. He would forget my name, then he would forget who I was. Then he forgot his name and who he was. At the end, it was as if his body forgot how to tell his lungs to breath and his heart to beat, and he died. *Alzheimers*, they called it.

I remember a football practice when our running back received a particularly vicious hit. He came and sat on the bench with a frightened look on his face. Finally he took hold of the helmet I was holding in my hand and looked me straight in the face and said, “Can you tell me who I am?” *Amnesia*, brought on by a concussion, they called it.

In the book of Numbers, after the people of Israel have been wandering for awhile and have been fed with heavenly food called *manna*, we have this interesting passage, “The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, ‘If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!’” They remembered the food they ate but they forgot that they received the food free because they were slaves and had to get their food free because their whole life was forfeit. They suffered *momentary amnesia*, some have said, brought on by stress and boredom.

In John 8:31–33 we have this interesting exchange between Jesus and people whose entire life, religion, and emotional identity came from the fact that their fathers had been slaves in Egypt. Their entire being came from the fact that God had freed them from bondage and brought them out of Egypt with a strong arm and a mighty hand. Listen to this: “³¹To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³²Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’ ³³They answered him, ‘We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?’” They suffered *cultural amnesia*, some have called it, brought on by sin.

How awful it is to lose memory. We go to great lengths to strengthen it. We teach our children tricks to make it work. How wonderful it is to remember the good things, the good times, the good old days. How important to remember the dangerous things! I have enough problems in my life without touching the same hot stove every day, running the same stop sign, or running into the same ditch and getting stuck. Go home after this service, get a concordance, and look at all the passages that talk about remembering. Most of the references have to do with blessing. God remembers and blesses. He remembered the people and the animals in the Ark, and He made the waters recede. He remembered Rachel and opened her womb so she could have a child. He remembered His covenant with people and forgave.

So listen carefully because this is important for your entire life. What I am about to tell you is a mystery that has real meaning and real value in everyday living. When the Bible talks about *remembering*, it is expressing an act that causes an event from the past to have real power in the present moment.

Remembering in the Bible is not just some fond feeling or the release of certain emotions — it has physical, emotional, and theological impact in the present moment. To remember something causes it to have power right now. When David says in Psalms 25, “**Remember** not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love **remember** me, for you are good, O LORD,” what he is saying is do not allow the sins of my past to “raise hell” and I mean that literally, today. That is what it means to *forget*. When Moses warns, “Be careful that you do not **forget** the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day,” he is saying if you forget God, His mercy and love and kindness will not be active in the present moment. Forgiving and forgetting means a making a conscious decision not to let something that someone has done raise hell in our relationship — even though I know what happened. It didn’t disappear from my mind, but I *choose* not to allow it to affect our relationship.

So our merciful Christ, anointed to be merciful, tells us to remember Him. When we receive the gift of the Lord’s Supper, He wants us to remember it so His mercy and love and kindness will be active in the present moment. He wants the forgiveness won because His body was broken to be active in the present moment. He wants the forgiveness won because His blood was shed to be active in the present moment. He wants the new people that He created by His death and resurrection to be active in the present moment. That is what the Lord’s Supper is all about.

Our merciful Christ, anointed for mercy, as our anointed Prophet, was here on the night in which He was betrayed, preaching the Gospel and making the Gospel visible in the bread and wine. Our merciful Christ, anointed for mercy, as our anointed Priest, is here, about to sacrifice Himself for the sins of the whole world, and interceding for us before the Father in heaven. Our merciful Christ, anointed for mercy, as our anointed King, is here, inviting us to the wedding feast of His kingdom and offering us a “foretaste of the feast to come.”

Luther says that in this Supper when we remember Jesus we get Him “whole and entire.” All that Christ is and has done becomes ours, and all that we deserve to suffer and endure becomes His. We become one loaf, one cake, one body with Christ and one another.

We have talked about our anointed merciful Jesus and what He was anointed to do: preach Good News to the poor. Those who are beggarly poor in spirit are, in fact, brought into fellowship and participation with Christ whole and entire. The Spirit-anointed Christ came to heal the broken hearted with forgiveness, life, and salvation. The Spirit-anointed Christ came to preach deliverance to those captive to sin, abuse, neglect, or addiction — name your captivity. Participation with Christ whole and entire means freedom. The Spirit-anointed Christ came to recover the sight of the blind. Spiritual blindness is cured and physical blindness is made bearable in the Sacrament. The Spirit-anointed Christ came to free the bruised — bruised by attacks of the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh. Bruised by our own foolishness, the Sacraments are a balm for the soul. The Spirit-anointed Christ also came to proclaim the Jubilee, or a year acceptable to the Lord. How much more can we be convinced that we have been accepted than to receive the very body and blood of Christ.

Many in the early church referred to the Lord’s Supper as medicine for the soul. Others referred to it as streams of living water that cause us to thirst no more. Others still have made reference to the Lord’s Supper as giving nourishment. But all these references have the same basic thought: The Lord’s Supper

is a marvelous remembrance of our anointed Savior because it gives faith, forgiveness, release from guilt, freedom from sin, and power to live a God-pleasing life.

Listen to what Garth Ludwig wrote in his book, *Order Restored*:

Holy Communion is a powerful healing sacrament of the church. Not only do the recipients of this Supper receive assurance that their sins are forgiven, but they are promised life and salvation in the name of Christ. Such promises of God intensify and strengthen the experience of wholeness. Just as in Baptism, the blessings of the Lord's Supper affect the whole person. We need to focus on the benefits to the body as well as the spiritual life of the person in considering the healing properties of this sacrament. This is not merely a spiritual eating and drinking but the giving of Christ's body and blood to the sick and ill for the strengthening of the whole person to salvation. As Luther puts it in the Large Catechism: "We must . . . regard this sacrament . . . as a pure, wholesome, soothing medicine which aids and quickens us in both soul and body. For where the soul is healed the body has benefited also."¹

One way to understand this healing activity of God is that we are compelled to leave all our anxieties and frustrations at the Lord's Table. In this Sacrament, Christ assures us by means of His bodily presence, that His gift of peace stands guard over our lives. When the pastor releases us from the table and says, "Depart in peace," this phrase can also be translated "Depart in a state of health" (see Luke 8:48).

Perhaps it is necessary to emphasize at this point that the Lord's Supper is becoming recognized as a healing experience by those who are active in the healing ministry. Both physical and mental healings are reported as occurring through the salutary use of this Sacrament. But why should this surprise us? The more we become aware of the intricate relationships of the spiritual, mental, and physical dimensions of our personhood, the more we are able to comprehend the meaning of Christ's words in Matt. 6:22: "If your eyes are sound, your whole body will be full of light." Healing of the spirit can and does affect healing in the body as well.

But the converse is also true. Human pride and hostility toward others can affect a person's bodily health in a negative manner. At Corinth, Paul scolded the members of the congregation for their lack of care and concern for the weaker members of the congregation while participating in the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:17–32). Such behavior, he made clear, constituted contempt for the body of Christ and made them guilty of profaning the Lord's body. The judgment of God against this sin of pride resulted in many of the offenders becoming sick and others dying.²

In the *Large Catechism*, Luther writes, "Holy Communion is appropriately called food of the soul, for it nourishes and strengthens the new creature. We are born anew in baptism. However, flesh and blood have not lost their old skin. There are so many attacks upon us that we often grow weary and faint and even stumble. Therefore the Lord's Supper is given as daily food so that our faith may be strengthened and grow stronger and stronger."

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

2 Garth D. Ludwig, *Order Restored*, (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1999), 209–210.

But there is more. Paul says of this Holy Supper, “Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.” Here believers are joined in true unity with each other! The Lord’s Supper shows our unity in sharing each others burdens, joys, and sorrows. One of the things that breaks the heart of more than a few pastors and parishioners is when people forget what church is all about and the relationship between believers in the church. Often gossip, slander, and cliques will form in a church because somebody did not do something in the church the way they liked. Fights break out over where the flowers should be, what color the carpet should be, how the snow was plowed, who brought what to the potluck. Because of these rifts, anger wells inside us, slander is spread, people stop coming to church in protest because they don’t like this or that person or this or that service. And we tear each other apart — the very people Christ died to make His united body! The Supper is the great unifier of Christian love and a reminder that, as far as it falls to you, you are to be at peace with all. God calls us by this gift to serve our brother. When they sin, correct them. When they repent, restore them. When they carry a burden, help them lift it. You have been given mercy — be merciful.

Participation (*koinonia*) in the Lord’s body and blood creates a relationship (*koinonia*) among the members of His body, the church. This is exactly St. Paul’s teaching:

“The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation (*koinonia*) in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation (*koinonia*) in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of one bread” (1 Cor. 10:16-17).

One bread — one body. Fellowship in the earliest church meant unity in teaching and unity in love. The Acts of the Apostles records that “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship (*koinonia*), to the breaking of bread (Lord’s Supper) and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). *Koinonia* is both vertical — the Lord to me/us — and horizontal, which is the fellowship of unity in faith and charity among the faithful. *Koinonia* was lived out in the book of Acts as the early Christians shared possessions and demonstrated a unity far beyond the local congregation. St. Paul’s amazing collection for poor Christians in Jerusalem is the theme that unites the book of Acts. In fact, Paul uses this one word, *koinonia*, for both the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 10:16–17) and for the collection for the poor (Rom. 15:26)! Thus, for Paul, to extend “the right hand of fellowship” (Gal. 2:9) means concern for needy Christians: “After declaring fellowship, James, Peter (Cephas), and John ‘asked us to remember the poor, the very thing we were most eager to do” (Gal. 2:10).

We laugh aloud at our Lutheran forerunners when we note their enmity for insurance. But the necessity of insurance policies and the reality of the modern welfare state has drastically altered our views of *koinonia* in the church. As a result, the church’s responsibility and privilege to conduct a corporate, ordered life of mercy has all but dropped from our teaching and even from our preaching. More unfortunate, what was once a strong Lutheran theme in the Lord’s Supper is rarely heard, namely, that this is a sacrament of love. As Luther said:

This fellowship consists in this, all the spiritual possessions of Christ and his saints are shared with and become the common property of him who receives this sacrament. Again all sufferings and sins also become common property and thus love engenders love in return and [mutual love] unites . . . It is like a city where every citizen shares with all the others the city’s name, honor,

freedom, trade, customs, usages, help, support, protection, and the like, while at the same time he shares all the dangers of fire and flood, enemies and death, losses, taxes, and the like. For he who would share in the profits must also share in the costs, and ever recompense love with love. Here we see that whoever injures one citizen injures an entire city and all its citizens; whoever benefits one [citizen] deserves favor and thanks from all the others. So also in our natural body, as St. Paul says in 1 Cor. 12 [:25–26], where he gives this sacrament a spiritual explanation, “The members have [the same] care for one another; if one members suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” This is obvious: if anyone’s foot hurts him, yes, even the little toe, the eye at once looks at it, the fingers grasp it, the face puckers, the whole body bends over to it, and all are concerned with this small member; again, once it is cared for all the other members are benefited. This comparison must be noted well if one wishes to understand this sacrament, for Scripture uses it for the sake of the unlearned.³

Rev. Harrison tells a story of the fear he felt in receiving communion by common cup at an African church with the highest incidence of AIDS in the country. Then he felt “wretched.” Here in this little church, a member of Christ’s body, was suffering. Rev. Harrison, as a fellow member of that body, needed to participate (*koinonia*). He tells how he took communion and, by God’s power, will always do so — AIDS or no AIDS. I had the same experience when I was in Africa, and I remembered one of my elderly saints dying in the hospital. I had brought her the Lord’s Supper. A sign above her head said she was to have nothing by mouth. I asked a nurse if I could give her communion, and before the nurse could answer that beautiful old woman said to me, “that is the body and blood of Jesus, and Jesus will not give me something that would harm me.” The nurse nodded and I felt ashamed.

Our anointed Christ gave us something to “remember Him” — a merciful meal so that we can be merciful. So come! The feast is ready!

3 Matthew C. Harrison, *Christ Have Mercy*, (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2008), 93–94.