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Oil and Water—and Mud (John 9.1–15; James 5.13–15)

Leonard Allen

I've always wondered about the mud in the story of Jesus healing the blind man. When I was a kid the mud in this story got my attention. We lived in a small Florida town on a dirt road. And when it rained my friends and I had a ready-made field of mud—which meant endless possibilities for grimy fun. I became a kind of artist with the mud.

So the image of Jesus making mud got me. A man blind since birth is before him. His disciples are wondering whose sin was responsible, the man's own or his parents'. Jesus spits on the ground, makes some mud, smears it on the man's eyes, and instructs him to wash it off in the Pool of Siloam. After a while the blind man came back seeing.

Why the mud on the blind eyes? Or we could ask about oil in James 5. Why the anointing of the sick with oil? Or we could ask about the laying on of hands. Why does the simple act of touching another person in the name of the Lord make any difference at all?

And we can ask about Christian baptism. How does the plunging of a body into ordinary water convey something momentous like newness of life? Or about the Lord's Supper. How does a small piece of bread and a thimbleful of wine nourish, not so much our bodies but our deepest hungers?

So oil and water and wine and bread. And laying on of hands. And maybe even mud. Let's say that each of these very ordinary things, in the hands of Jesus, becomes a kind of sacrament, a channel, a means of God's love and grace. How might such an amazing thing happen?

I grew up in a pretty small and parochial Christian "village." We all have to grow up in some kind of village. My village—and particularly my family's own little corner of that village—was characterized by what can be called a *dualistic* view of the world. In its basic form dualism divides the world into a material/physical realm and a spiritual/immaterial realm. Material things are fraught with evil and are meant to be put off while spiritual things are the realm of the good and of God. So my journey of faith has been out of a truncated, dualistic view of creation. I've thought hard and worked hard at that, especially in my twenties and early thirties. It's one reason I felt compelled to do graduate work in the history of Christian thought—to gain perspective on and learn to critique my own beginnings.

In the biblical story creation is good. And all human beings are created as divine image bearers. Creation, to be sure, is disordered or *fallen* in the Christian view but still permeated by signs of grace and beauty—because creation is *good*. Patterned after Christ's incarnation, Christian faith, properly understood, is thoroughly *incarnational*. God is redeeming and renewing the creation, and the people of God, in the power of the Spirit, are already an advance guard of the new heavens and new earth.

When we speak of sacraments, then, we are speaking of physical things, created things that—joined with human words and actions—become channels of the presence and grace of God. Let me return to my question: How might such an amazing thing happen?

First, at the heart of the gospel is the incarnation of Christ. The Son of God becomes a human being. He is enfleshed and so *befriends* the physical body—all the way from conception to resurrection and indeed to the final judgment.

Second, scripture reveals the intimate relationship between Jesus and the Spirit. At the annunciation, the angel says to Mary, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (Luke 1.35). At his baptism, the Spirit came to rest or dwell on Jesus in bodily form like a dove (3.21). Full of the Spirit and led by the Spirit into the desert, he was tempted for forty days (4.1). And under the anointing of the Spirit, Jesus “went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil” (Acts 10.38). And following the crucifixion, God through the Holy Spirit raised Jesus from the dead (Rom 8.11).

I want you to see here the mutual relationship between the Spirit and the Son in the incarnation. Jesus took on flesh; he became a human being. And the Spirit was with him every step of the way. The Spirit came to rest on Christ’s body. We might say that the Spirit, for Jesus’s sake, became a friend of the body.

So Gene Rogers says, “To think about the Spirit, you have to think materially because, in Christian terms, the Spirit has befriended matter. She has befriended matter for Christ’s sake on account of the incarnation.”¹ And at Pentecost the Spirit came to rest on Christ’s body once again—his spiritual body, the church. And there we continually experience the “fellowship of the Spirit.” And there, because the Spirit has befriended matter, very ordinary things can become sacraments of God’s love and grace: oil and water and bread and wine; the bodies of human beings as they are baptized; and the laying on of hands and anointing with oil.

Let me suggest that in our baptisms, water enjoys its significance because the Spirit has befriended it. And that in our communion service, bread and wine enjoy their significance because the Spirit has befriended them. And that when we anoint the hurting, “oil enjoys its significance because the Spirit has befriended it.”²

The Christian tradition has not found much use for mud—though Christ made powerful use of it with the man born blind. And I’m not suggesting that we should. But I am saying that God’s creation is good, though broken, and that even now it is being healed of its brokenness. Jesus’s healings, for example of this blind man, are signs of the coming reign of God. Jesus didn’t just proclaim the kingdom of God in words in order to awaken faith; he also brought signs of it in the form of healings—pointers to the beginning of the new creation of all things.

The Gospels give us a profound insight into Jesus’s power to heal: Matthew 8 says, “And he healed many who were sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, ‘He took our infirmities and bore our diseases’” (v. 17). Jesus’s power to heal is the power of his suffering. He heals us by carrying our sicknesses, and through his wounds we are healed (Isa 53.5).

Because Christ and the Spirit have befriended the physical body and befriended matter, I share the conviction of St. Theresa of Lisieux that “grace is everywhere.” Even in mud.

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1. Gene Rogers, *After the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 58.

2. *Ibid.*