

LENT 5

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

SERMON

Last week, coming up my basement stairs, I could tell dinner wasn't going to be quite what I'd hoped - I was met by that smell - that burnt smell from a pot on the stove that's run out of liquid... While I salvaged my meal, that burnt smell lingered in my house for days. I didn't notice it everywhere, but walking into the kitchen, it met me. Present. Linger

Smells - what smells do you notice? What scents linger, linking you to times and places of the past?
Bread fresh out of the oven...

Sidewalks after a rain...

Last year's Easter hyacinths, planted next to the house, that give off such a strong perfumey odor..

While transplanting geraniums the other day, the smell of those plants brought a cascade of other smells and memories - I was brought back to my childhood - my father's greenhouse, the smell of warm potting soil, the specific smell of the geranium leaves, the scent of water on earth.

I learned this week that, according to Harvard Biologist Venkatesh Murthy¹, smell and memory are so closely linked due to the brain's anatomy.

Smells take a direct route from the olfactory bulb, at the front of the brain, to the limbic system, which includes the regions related to emotion and memory.

The article goes on to say that smell is the only fully developed sense a fetus has in the womb, and it's the one that is the most developed in a child through the age of around 10 when, eventually, sight takes over.

And because "smell and emotion are stored as one memory," childhood tends to be the period in which you create "the basis for smells you will like and hate for the rest of your life."

That explains why some who grew up on farms, with fond memories of their childhood, find the smell of manure comforting - and well, some of us smell it for what it is.

¹ [What the nose knows. Harvard Gazette.](#)

There's a lot going on in our nose and brain from the moment we're born - and, I learned, if we use our nose like a muscle - giving it a daily workout of paying attention to what we're smelling, our sense of smell can grow, even as we age.

Oh, we are fearfully and wonderfully made!

Our scripture today reads:

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. (John 12: 1-3)

(Acknowledge the commentaries of Matt Skinner² and Karoline Lewis³, both from Luther Seminary, and how they shaped this sermon.)

The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

The smell of the perfume, costing almost a year's wages, permeating every nook and cranny of that room.

Nard would have been a familiar smell to those gathered- it was used both as an incense offering in the temple and used to prepare bodies for burial.

Yes, those sitting at that table would have immediate memories associated with the fragrance of the perfume.

What other smells were present that evening? The lingering smells of dinner... sweaty bodies and unwashed clothes...

Those smells, dominated by the perfume on Jesus' feet and in Mary's hair.

² [Working Preacher. Matt Skinner commentary](#)

³ [Working Preacher. Karoline Lewis Commentary](#)

The everyday smells of life linger in contrast to the smell of death also in the room. Does Jesus have a smell of death on him already, as he chastises Judas saying: 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.'?

Did Mary recognize that smell of death, and offer the perfume as a sign of extravagant devotion? Here, in the room of our scripture, we have the smell of love in the face of certain betrayal.

This perfume is indeed, a smell of extravagant love. Mary is living out Jesus' commandment — "love one another as I have loved you." Abundant love; love that costs every penny of savings - that's the odor Mary brings into this space.

A smell not to counteract death;
not to erase death's smell,
not to overpower the stench that may have still lingered on Lazarus - recently raised from the dead.
But a scent to smell *at the same time* you can smell the scent of death.

I wonder if this is the point. Smells don't replace each other — they contrast, they tell the truth about our human existence.

John's gospel is full of images that elicit our olfactory sense:

The smell of good wine at the wedding of Cana...

The smell of the hot sun on a well's stonewalls.

The smell of a man's pallet on which he had to lie for 38 years.

The smell of bread, broken and shared.

The smell of mud spread on the eyes of a man born blind.

The smell of a green pasture of grass to nurture a hungry flock.

The smell of Lazarus' decomposing body.

What is it about smell? Those that please and those that repulse? Those that delight and those that distance?

Smell is such a part of our humanness...

In case we need a reminder that Jesus is truly the Word made flesh, here it is. Jesus, caught between the smell of love and the smell of the cross.

There is no one *or* the other.

The simultaneous smells of life and death — that's the hard part about this text. While we may want Mary's devotion to make the stench of death dissipate, that is not reality.

Death and life exist together.

There is no erasing the smell of death.

The point of these waning weeks in Lent is not to kid ourselves.

In some ways, Nothing changes with Jesus' resurrection. Death will still smell as it does.

Death will still seep through every crevice that we might try to stopgap.

Death will still find the smallest crack to invade our assurances that resurrection is true.

And yet...

And yet, everything changes with Jesus' resurrection.

Just don't let the smell of abundant love and life allow you to think that the smell of death won't be there as well.

Why? Because the smell of life is only as sweet as its opposite.

It is while we smell death that we can smell life. It is while we smell a rotting body in a tomb that we can smell the earth underneath the stone as it is being rolled away. That earth that is filled with life, ready to sprout.

It is while we can barely stand the smell of Lazarus that Mary pours perfume on Jesus' feet.

We can't choose to smell one thing over another.

It takes control of us. It is just there and somehow, somehow, you have to deal with it, whatever memory it brings back, whatever feeling it elicits, whatever good or bad effects it brings on.

That is the power of the sense of smell.

It permeates our life with the good and the bad, the joyful and the painful.

And that is the power of this story, especially here and now looking forward to the last two weeks of Lent.

This story of love and betrayal, the rich scent of perfume alongside the lingering smell of death - this story holds together Lent and Easter so very tightly that you wonder how you can separate the two —

and the point is that you can't.

One does not exist without the other — that is the truth of Jesus' presence - Jesus' willingness to come and live among us.

Jesus holds the tension of the opposites - blessing Mary's reckless sign of love that permeated the air with sweet perfume - alongside the foreshadowing of death soon to come.

Jesus - the one who fashioned pungent wine out of water

- the one who broke bread, passing it around for all to eat
- the one who called Lazarus out of the stench of the tomb

This Jesus, fully human, knowing what was to come, holds the pain and suffering of life, side by side, knowing that the stench of death is a necessary part of the smell of resurrection.

New life comes forth from death. There's no way around it.

And, that is the very hope of this season - life and death, beauty and betrayal, all a part of this complex story. Jesus welcomes it all.

Loves us all; shows us the way to hold it all.

Take a deep breath, here... later, when you're sitting down to a meal... while the rain hits the earth - notice the smells of our lives - and know, know, that the complexity of our lives are held by the One who Creates it all.