

Sermon for April 3, 2022

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The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

I will never forget David, one of my ninth grade friends. David was firm believer that if a drop of Axe cologne smelled good, taking a bath in the bottle of it was bound to be even better. You could smell when David was approaching the area. And if you had a class with him, you could count on that aroma filling the whole classroom. Sometimes it was so strong you could taste it. The smell actually seeped into your clothes and even when got home it often lingered. I remember during a particularly difficult time in 9th grade, it was David who would give the encouraging hugs and offer his patient, physical presence in silent support, all the time your nostrils being filled with the scent of his perfume. To this day anytime I catch a whiff of Axe cologne, I am instantly transported back to the memory of this friend and his fragrant acts of care.

Smell is a powerful thing – it attaches us to memories, causing us to remember. In today's gospel story, Mary takes a pound of costly perfume and anoints Jesus' feet. And that room is filled with the fragrance. It is an encounter that is remembered and written down in our Gospel texts - not only because of the strong and memorable smell, but because of the extravagance of this act of care and the contrast that surrounds it.

Directly before this text, we hear the story of the death of Mary's brother Lazarus. In that story Lazarus has been dead for four days by the time Jesus responds to Mary and her sister Martha's message to come. When he arrives at the tomb, he finds a large stone rolled in front of the cave and the sisters and people weeping. Moved in spirit, acting with extravagant love and care, Jesus calls for them to remove the stone. And here is where there is a contrasting reference to smell. Martha hesitates, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days..." Martha anticipates, expects the smell of death to permeate the air when the tomb is opened.

Jesus says to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" And he proceeds to have stone rolled away, to give thanks to God for the gift of that moment, and to cry out "Lazarus come out!" And an act of extravagant love and care overcomes death.

Lazarus, now raised from the dead, sits at the table and eats with Mary, Martha, Jesus and his disciples. And instead of grief they celebrate life, instead of the stench of death, the air is filled with a fragrant act of extravagant love.

This act of love must have permeated all of Jesus' senses. He could see Lazarus there with him, risen from the dead and Mary, whose grief had brought him to tears, there kneeling at his feet. He could feel her gentle hands anointing with oil and the brush of her hair used to dry the excess from his feet. The smell would have filled his nostrils, probably even causing him to taste the aroma on his tongue, of that pound of costly perfume of pure nard.

It is then that Jesus' ears hear a contrasting note from Judas. The voice questions this act of extravagant love - "Why was this perfume not sold and the money given to the poor." The text stresses that it is not because Judas cared for the poor but rather because he was a thief who would have stolen the profit while he kept the common purse. While Mary has seen and responded to the promises of Jesus, Judas' heart remains hard. While Jesus had predicted his upcoming death, Judas continues to seek a way to force Jesus' to act in a way consistent with his understanding of who the Messiah should be. Mary, on the other hand, simply surrenders, providing care, anointing Jesus' feet for the path ahead, trusting in the mystery of God's ways and loving in the moments she is given.

Jesus will carry this memory with him on the journey that lay ahead. This touch and smell will linger on his skin as he approaches the cross. The scent will remain in his nose and stir up the memory of love and care as he endures the hardships that are to come. He will recall the memory of the fragrance of love that overpowers the stench of death.

Only days later, Jesus will sit at the feet of his disciples and wash their feet calling them to do the same for others. Will they remember the feel of the water and Jesus' gentle hands on their feet? Will they recall the clean scent in the air? Jesus calls them to remember that this act of service and love may carry them through the journey ahead. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." For these acts of love overwhelm our senses and carry us on the journey ahead.

Pause for a minute – are there smells that remind you of extravagant expressions of love? Maybe the smell of a comfort food fixed and served for you in an act of care or compassion? Maybe the scent of a loved one who sat beside you through a difficult time? Did these acts of love and care carry you forward on the journey? Smell is a powerful thing but acts of love and care even more so. Acts of love and care can permeate and fill our world, overpowering the stench of sin and death.

In two weeks we will stand with Mary and the woman at the tomb of Christ. The world may tell us to expect the stench of death, but when the stone is rolled away death is overcome and extravagant love fills our senses. We are once again invited to gather around the table and remember...

Then we are sent out into the world to fill the air with the fragrance of love, to let extravagant acts of care permeate the spaces we enter. To be like my high school friend David - if a drop of love is good, why not bathe in it, so that people can catch a whiff before we even enter the space, so that it overwhelms the rooms we are in, stays on people who are in its presence even after they leave the area, and years later triggers memories bringing them back to recall what it feels like to be loved and cared for and motivated to do the same.

For in our baptisms, we have been bathed in this love and anointed to carry it into the world. When you come up to pick up your communion elements today, you are invited to dip your finger in anointing oil from Holy Lands and trace the sign of the cross on the inside of your wrist or somewhere on your skin. May the scent fill your nostrils, stir up your memories and send you forth to carry the aroma into the world.