

The Scent of Genuine Faith
April 3, 2022
John 12:1-8
Rev. Laurie Crelly at East Church
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“Would you like a free sniff? Sniff? Would you like a free sniff? I got free sniffs here. Do you like apple pie, pine, or lily of the valley? Those are our best sellers.” These are the opening lines of a business, that my ex-partner Denise and I had for over 10 years. A birthday gift of a candle making kit turned into a cottage business that we ran with her parents for 10 years. If you went to a local craft show in the Twin Cities, you probably found us there hawking our wares, offering free sniffs of over 30 different candles and fragrances that we had to offer. It was a great job, I loved it. And when we were in the high time of candle making season, which was anywhere between summer and late fall, I would come home from work and be hit at the door with multiple fragrances wafting through the house; permeating everything in the house: apple pie, ocean mist, fresh cut flowers, green grass, and all these wonderful scents that we had.

Scents and fragrances are something that we hold dear to us that bring back memories, trigger thoughts and happy places. You know Lily of the Valley is a beautiful scent that we think of with Easter and our gardens every Spring. Apple pie - Maddie's apple pie, triggering memories of home baked pies at grandma's. Northwoods Pine reminding us of a fresh-cut pine tree in the house at Christmas.

I'm sure if I asked you would all have a fragrance or scent not only that you enjoy but triggers a memory. It may be of a cologne of someone that you love and care about. It may be a favorite smell of food cooking in the house. It may be a memory of a special place you visited.

And it's these memories that trigger us, that touch us deeply, that hang with us just like the sound of a wonderful song that we remember. But we also know that our noses are also sensitive to difficult, troubling smells. The smell of rotten eggs tells you might have a gas leak. Or the smell of a rotten potato gets you digging in the cupboard trying to figure out where it is. Or the smell of a decomposing animal somewhere in the house. These are smells that we take in and remind us to be afraid, to be concerned and investigate.

In today's story out of the Gospel we have one of the rare opportunities where fragrance is the major character in the story. We smell. We sense the smells of this perfume permeating the whole household. Everyone is getting it in their clothes, no one can avoid the smell of the ointment Mary is putting on Jesus's feet.

Now in John's gospel the timing of this is just one chapter after Lazarus was raised from the dead. And what's interesting is both of those chapters talk about smell. You might remember where Martha says "Jesus, no, don't roll away the stone because he smells." He stinks! Or if you're know the King James version, "he stinketh." We know what death smells like. And in those times they would cover the body with perfumes and aloes to try to cover or mask the smell, to dampen it down. And yet Jesus said "Have faith roll, away the stone." And the smell of a body that should have been decomposing stands up and walks out. And that smell of death is transformed into resurrection.

So here, one chapter later, Jesus and the disciples have come back to Bethany to be with their beloved friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus. And I wonder – does Lazarus still smell like death and resurrection? Did his skin absorb that scent so that he still has that lingering fragrance on his skin?

This story in John chapter 12 is the day before Jesus is to go into Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday; which we'll be celebrating next week. Jesus has been talking about his death with his disciples for weeks. Perhaps that was part of the conversation at that dinner party that night - that Jesus once again tried to help his disciples and his friends understand what was coming. Maybe that's what prompted Mary to get up and take the jar of nard, that she probably used for her brother also, and went to Jesus.

Perhaps she wasn't going to let past the possibility of showing Jesus how much she loves him like she lost out on the opportunity of telling her brother before he died. So, she goes to him and begins to anoint his body with the oils not knowing if this was the last time they would be together. And that fragrance fills the place reminding everyone of this mingling of death and life together once again.

According to Scholars this is the juxtaposition in John's gospel, the moment that it turns in a new direction. In the first eleven chapters Jesus is all about preaching about life and light. He uses these terms over 80 times: "I am the life, I'm the way, the light" All these positive images are in the early chapters from John. But after chapter 11 the language changes where those two words fall away.

Jesus stops his public ministry and begins to focus on his disciples exclusively. Jesus' teachings in John begin to focus on Love. Jesus uses the term love over 30 times in the latter chapters vs. 6 times in the first eleven chapters of John's Gospel. I wonder if this shift came because of what Mary is doing here.

That image of her washing Jesus's feet with this ointment is re-enacted by Jesus just a few days later at the Last Supper when he realizes this is his last chance to show his disciples love. There again he sits down and eats and shares a meal with them and washes their feet as an act of love. Mary's gift is meaningful to us, it speaks to us because it is a gift full of love and compassion. If you've ever worked or been with somebody who is struggling with their health or maybe we don't know what they're going to make it you see the love and compassion and care that those who are closest to them should be, and are often, giving. Showing more love and compassion and caressing their sore muscles.

Mary's gift is also extravagant and sacrificial. You know this jar of nard worth 300 denarii is over a year's wages. Can you imagine having a small jar that is worth thousands and thousands of dollars, but you're going to extravagantly pour out onto somebody. Her gift was personal. You save that for the most beloved in your family, on that day. Mary's gift was also spontaneous. Something sparked her at that moment during that meal saying I need to do this and I need to do this now. I don't know and I don't care who's watching. I don't care, I'm going to do this. That's the sweet smell of pure faith that we have wafting through the house.

But then we catch a whiff of a negative smell in the midst of it. Judas. His reaction is cruel. He rebuffs her actions, call it a waste and ridiculous. Judas is trying to shroud his attitude, his real intentions with a shroud of religiosity, "Why wasn't this sold and given to the poor?" I can almost hear his ridicule in it. You see Judas was self-serving in that action. He wasn't worried about the poor, he was thinking about himself and how he could have had access to this money had it been given to him. The writer clarifies his real intention by showing how he was stealing from the purse.

Jesus called him out on it "You're always going to have the poor with you but you're not always going to have me." We always have the opportunity to show love and care to the poor but under what purpose, under what intent, are we doing that kind gesture? Is it for love, like Mary, or is it out of greed like Judas? Judas's words come to my nostrils, maybe to yours too, as a stench - something that you want to run away from. It's something that you go 'it sounds good but it doesn't smell right.'

I think we've all been there at one point in our lives. We've also been around people, or we hear stories about people who are self-serving. They may even use religious language to cover up their real motives. You feel it, you smell it. It turns your head. And our spiritual noses know the difference when we catch a whiff of it. We know it smells off, but fortunately, we also know the smell of true spiritual faith. We smell and see Mary's perfume pervasively spreading, just like the gospel of love pervasively spreading on that day of Pentecost a few weeks later.

You see people are fragile, our faith is fragile, life is fragile. And Jesus wants us to make the most of it with love, not with stench. The question comes to us. Will we seek after and share that kind of love and compassion with others even when we know we can't change the circumstances? Mary knew that she would not be able to convince Jesus not to go to Jerusalem the next day. The disciples had tried. Peter, said "Jesus, don't do this." The Pharisees tried it. "Oh Jesus they want to kill you don't go there." Mary doesn't do that she decides that I don't know if I'm going to see you after you die, if that's what's going to come next, so I'm going to take advantage of it now to let you know how much I love you. 'Seize the moment' and she did. The smell of her act, that love, permeated the place for everyone. That scent would not only cling to their clothing for the coming days when they would be walking into Jerusalem with Jesus, but that smell is in their nostrils while he's on the cross. And that smell is in their nostrils on the day of resurrection.

And that same scent is what woke Mary up when Jesus rose from the dead. On that day she was the first one to witness it. She had gone to the tomb thinking they had not been able to prepare the body, so she goes to the tomb and Jesus meets her there and she hears the word "Mary." It's like a sweet fragrance in her nostrils telling her this is not the gardener, this is my Lord.

As we enter these final weeks of Lent we are left with the question about what lasting fragrance do we offer the world? How can we repent of the fake religiosity in our lives and how can we offer a genuine, compassionate faith to a world that is dying and in need of resurrection life?