

The 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent (C)  
April 3, 2022  
Text: John 12:1-8

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When I catch the scent of fresh-cut grass and gasoline, one of the things it makes me think of working alongside my dad and helping with mowing the yard when I'd go back to visit during the summer. When I smell the aroma of roasted green chilies, it transports me to autumn in New Mexico. I can almost see the big chili roaster in front of our neighborhood grocery store and feel the bright, brisk fall day. There's a certain harsh smell of a disinfecting cleanser that brings to mind sitting with people I've loved and cared for in hospital rooms and nursing home rooms, waiting, wondering, worrying, while they slowly got better, or didn't. The sense of smell is powerfully connected to memory. Some particular smell can catch us by surprise, taking us back to a different place and time, to people and feelings and activities we shared together.

The sense of smell plays an important role in our gospel story for today. Mary and Martha hosted a special dinner for Jesus. Mary took a whole jar of tremendously expensive perfume and used it to anoint Jesus' feet. The beautiful fragrance filled the house so that everyone could smell it. It might be helpful to remember that, just before this special dinner, there was a very different sort of smell in the air. Jesus had come to Bethany after hearing that Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, had died. When Jesus came to Lazarus' tomb and asked that the stone covering the entrance be rolled away, Martha warned that it had been four days since Lazarus had died and there would be the stench of death. But Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb and back from death. I think our gospel writer wants us to be aware of these two very different smells, the stink of death and the sweet smell of Mary's perfume.

In part, Mary anointed Jesus with her expensive perfume as an expression of gratitude. Jesus gave Mary her brother back! How could she not pour out the most precious thing she possessed to say, "Thank you, Jesus, thank you, thank you." Perhaps she could almost imagine that Jesus had put an end to death, because Lazarus was alive again! But the story John invites us to hear is more complicated than that. Although Jesus restored Lazarus to life, a day would come when Lazarus would die again, and in fact, Jesus' own death was only a few days away. Life and death are all mixed up together, both in the story and in our own lived experience.

I wonder whether we can see that mixed up reality most clearly in the contrast between Mary and Judas. Mary's expensive perfume smells like life and generosity and gratitude and love and extravagant, joyful abundance. It is so beautiful. But Judas comes in trailing the odor of criticism and self-righteousness and greed and hypocrisy. Our gospel writer reminds us that Judas would be the one to betray Jesus. All of Judas' actions have the stink of death about them. It all is so ugly. It would be nice if we could say that the sweet smell of Mary's perfume completely replaced the stink that Judas brought in. But it seems instead that both linger in the air, and each in its own way has power to help us recognize God's gifts of life and grace and love.

Mary's extravagant and grateful gift reminds me that abundance and generosity are God's signature moves. We can recognize them in "new thing" that the prophet Isaiah says God is doing: rivers flowing in the desert to provide water for God's people. Jesus reveals the same

kind of signature move, with gallons upon gallons of the very best wine for the wedding in Cana, or baskets upon baskets of bread and fish for a hungry crowd. Our gospel writer tells us the wine and the bread were signs pointing to who Jesus is and revealing the gracious character of his saving work. Perhaps we've recognized the same character in the forgiveness we've received from Jesus, or in the gifts of creation that God provides, not only to sustain life, but to give joy and blessing—in abundance.

The beautiful fragrance of Mary's perfume also reminds me of so many of the ways I've witnessed and received joy from the generous and compassionate and grateful actions of God's people. Winter before last, some friends shoveled snow from their elderly neighbor's sidewalk—a generous, kind, beautiful, sweet-smelling act! When a family was having a really difficult time with their teenage daughter, friends provided just the right kind of help—so compassionate, so gracious, such a wonderfully fragrant gift. I wonder when you've seen people act with love, or serve the cause of justice, or care for the earth. I don't think we would have enough time left in the whole day today to tell all the stories of when we've seen or received acts of generosity and compassion and gratitude that left a wonderful fragrance behind.

Sadly, in addition to being generous or compassionate, people can also be cruel or stingy or selfish or small-hearted, just like Judas. And unfortunately, Mary's beautiful fragrance doesn't completely overpower the stink that Judas brings with him. That foul smell lingers, reminding us that Jesus' work of healing for the human family isn't complete yet. Even this side of the resurrection, God is still at work to renew and forgive and reconcile and heal. Whether it's war in Ukraine or homelessness and violence on the streets of Portland, or any of the other places where the world's wounds are on sad display, God shares the suffering of those who are hurt. Jesus' cryptic words about the anointing being in preparation for his burial point to the mystery that Jesus identifies with and is committed to every person who lives with pain or grief. Even in places where human death-dealing stinks the worst, the risen Jesus brings God's abundant love, and overflowing grace, and deep, deep compassion and forgiveness. This is the good news, the Gospel news, that not only brings comfort and strength, but helps us find our way in a confusing world.

Dear children of God, it is our greatest joy to know what the Gospel smells like—like the most astonishing, scandalously expensive perfume there is. It smells like forgiveness for those who cringe at the thought of things they've done in the past. It smells like reconciliation for those who are enemies or estranged. It smells like acceptance for those who have been rejected, and healing for those who feel broken. It smells like hope for those who are filled with despair and courage for those who are afraid. The gospel smells like renewal and new life for the whole human family, compassion for those in need and being found for those who are lost. It smells like love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. It smells like amazing grace and justified by faith and no condemnation and eternal life and free at last. The Gospel is the sweetest smell there is. And through your acts of compassion and forgiveness and generosity, the Spirit of God is working to spread that beautiful fragrance everywhere. Thanks be to God. Amen.