



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“The Fragrance of Faith”

John 12:1-11

April 7, 2019

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I want to talk for a minute about a fruit found in Southeast Asia called durian. It is slightly oval, about a foot wide and covered in formidable looking spikes. And then there is the smell. It has such a potent stench that it's banned in hotels, taxis, trains and public places. Our bulletin cover has the no durian symbol found throughout the region. One food critic writes about durian: “its odor is best described as...turpentine and onions, garnished with a gym sock.” The only thing worse than its smell is its taste. I say this from experience. Bitter experience. It is the worst thing I have ever tasted. The worst thing that I ever smelled.¹

I share this because our sense of smell may be the most powerful of our five senses. It is the sense most closely linked with memory. A specific odor can act as a trigger in recalling a long-forgotten event or experience. Smell is also highly emotive. The perfume industry is built around this connection, with perfumers developing fragrances that seek to convey a vast array of emotions and feelings.²

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

“Smells are surer than sights or sounds to make your heartstrings crack,” writes Vladimir Nabokov.³ I smell Chanel #5 and instantly think of my grandmother who has been dead for over twenty years. The smell of a freshly opened container of Play-Doh instantly takes me back to my kindergarten classroom.

Let's think for a minute about some of the smells of the Gospel of John:

- the smell of good wine
- the smell of a hot sun on the stones of a well
- the smell of a man's pallet on which he had to lie for 38 years
- 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 flock⁴

This morning's text is filled with smells. First a little context for today's reading. The focus is the family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. They are siblings and friends of Jesus. In chapter 11, Lazarus dies. But then Jesus comes on the scene and he and Mary and Martha head out to the cemetery and Jesus calls out to Lazarus and he comes out of the tomb. Alive.

It's one happy ending. Lazarus is reunited with his family and friends. It's awesome. Except. What's that smell? It's rather unpleasant. Kind of nasty if you ask me. Smells like something dead and rotting.

¹ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/why-does-the-durian-fruit-smell-so-terrible-149205532/#3DsHwXWqCROIE55r.99>

² <http://www.fifthsense.org.uk/psychology-and-smell/>

³ Quoted in Rachel Herz, *The Scent of Desire: Discovering Our Enigmatic Sense of Smell* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 1.

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I'm not one to point fingers but I think it might be Lazarus.

The Bible is clear and unambiguous on this point. Lazarus stinks. It says so in John chapter 11, verse 39. The Bible doesn't say that the stench ever disappears.

Can you imagine it? He's alive but he smells like death. And I'm betting he doesn't look too good either. A trifle decomposed.

Yes, if there's anyone in this drama who deserves our pity, it is Lazarus. What kind of life is there for him? In this morning's passage, you get the feeling that he's become of a bit of an attraction in his hometown. Understandably. Who wouldn't want to see and smell a guy who used to be dead?

In today's reading, a new fragrance enters the scene. Mary has something called nard. It's an aromatic essential oil derived from a flowering plant that grows in the Himalayas. No surprise, it is rare and expensive. Mary pours it on Jesus. She anoints him, something that may seem odd and unusual to us but was a thing people did in the ancient world to indicate that someone is set apart. Kings are anointed. The sick are anointed. The dead are anointed. That day in Bethany, Mary anoints Jesus.

The smell of nard, costing almost a year's wages, permeates every nook and cranny of today's reading.

- It is the smell of extravagant love.
- It is the smell of abundant grace
- It is the smell of devotion in the face of betrayal.

The smell of Mary's perfume doesn't erase the smell of death. And the scent of death – it isn't just on Lazarus – it's on Jesus as well. At this point in the Gospel, he is headed towards Jerusalem, to his death.

At the moment captured in today's reading, Jesus is caught between the smell of life and the smell of death. While we may want Mary's devotion to overpower the shadow of death, that is not the case. Death and life exist together.

My grandfather was dead – my grandfather whom I loved more than any other person in the world was dead. My cousins and I were at the visitation. I can't remember who started it, but at some point in the evening, we began to laugh. We were so happy to see each other and the fact is we didn't know how to act standing so close to our grandfather's dead body. We found ourselves laughing and then we looked at each other in horror: how could we laugh when our grandfather was dead?

And then the next day after the funeral – all of the relatives came back to the house and they started to tell stories – stories about grandpa and grandma and grandpa's sisters, who incidentally were all entirely bald, stories about mom and her sister and they told such wonderful stories, such funny stories. And the adults laughed and we laughed and all of us laughed until our stomachs hurt and we found out that it is OK to laugh. It was the day that I discovered that laughter and life are impossibly intertwined with sadness and death.

Joy and sorrow intermingled. Lament and praise confused forever.⁵ Death and life exist side by side.

⁵ Gabe Huck, *A Christmas Sourcebook*, Liturgy Training Publications, 1984.

Back to our text and the competing smells of life and love, of death and defeat. Smells are neutral. They don't lie. So, what do the smells of this story tell us? The smell of death that permeates the text reminds us (Do we need to be reminded of this?) that death is real. Death awaits us all. Note that I am using the word death. Euphemisms are popular – passed on, transitioned, went home, departed. Our Christian story is unafraid to use the word death.

This is news for those of us who are acquainted with death. If death is knocking on your door, if death has carried away one of your beloved ones, know that this story – our story – gently acknowledges that reality.

Also know this. Just as powerful as the odor of death is the smell of love, of devotion, of hope. Just as strong is the scent of new life, of life begun again, of the life to come, of life fulfilled, redeemed. It is just as real as death, just as powerful.

This morning we smell both. Because that is the truth of our lives. Our tradition, our story acknowledges both. That is the power of the sense of smell. It permeates our life with the bad and the good, the painful and the powerful, the difficult and the delightful.

But, in the Christian story, doesn't life always triumph over death?

On this 5th Sunday in the season of Lent, the answer to that question is not clear. In Holy week, which begins a week from today, these two forces are going to clash – it will be an epic battle. On Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, death will have the upper hand.

That's not the end of the story. Come Easter morning... I'm getting ahead of myself. If this gets resolved, it's in two weeks' time. Come back next Sunday, Palm Sunday – then come to church Maundy Thursday or Good Friday and then don't miss Easter morning. Come and see how the story ends. Or more accurately, how the story – our story – begins again.

To be continued...