

## **“The Aroma of Christ”**

**2 Corinthians 2:12-17**

**First Presbyterian Church  
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The life of a pastor:

A knock on your office door. The wife enters your office, closes the door and through tears tells you about her husband’s unfaithfulness. There is a marriage to mend.

An elder in your church is arrested. His years of tax evasion are now public. There is a friend to redeem and reclaim. There’s a congregation to encourage.

A high school senior is in the emergency room. Her drug overdose may take her life. There are parents in shock who need you to be there and they need your prayers.

The list goes on and on.

Suicides and separations. Divorces and deaths. Wayward children. Questions about faith. Members of your church wander away. They disappear from worship. Some even leave the faith.

The pastoral part of pastoring is the front line in the battle against this present darkness of a fallen world. It is trying. It is difficult. It can be emotionally consuming and exhausting. It can cause worry and anxiety that can paralyze. It is driven many a pastor from the ministry.

As a layman on staff here at First Presbyterian, I have a unique and personal vantage point from which to see what our pastors experience day in and day out. We are so blessed to have such men serving us; Gerrit, Whitney, Jim, Josh and Darin. They are in the heat of the battle. Many of you have been the recipients of their care and their prayer.

I’ve been a member of this church a long time, off and on since 1959. As I look around this room, I see so many familiar faces. And behind each face are stories. Stories each one of you could tell about your own worries and struggles and trauma in this human experience. We all face those things over which we have no control; things that have hurt badly. So let’s remind ourselves that it is not only

pastors to whom Paul speaks, but he speaks to all of us who are followers of Christ. He gives us God's Word in which we find the same comfort and strength and hope that he found.

The Apostle Paul was not immune to the personal burden of pastoring. We read his words. "...my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia." He would later say in chapter 11, "And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me, of my anxiety for all the churches."

Paul truly pastored and lead these churches with the *heartfelt engagement* that Gerrit talked about last week. He truly and genuinely cared about his people.

Last week we also learned Timothy had gone to Corinth and reported that the church was in turmoil. There was sexual immorality, disorder in worship, mis-use of spiritual gifts, confusion about marriage, divorce, pagan religions and misunderstanding about the resurrection of the body. Paul immediately set out for Corinth. But it was a very painful visit. The church openly rebelled against Paul and he left in order to keep the peace. He went back to Ephesus. From there he wrote the really 'severe' third letter that we learned about last week. It was a letter taking them to task for departing from that which Paul had taught them.

So as Paul wrote the words we read this morning, he was waiting in Ephesus for Titus to return from Corinth to tell him how the church had reacted to his "severe letter".

There was work for Paul to do to be sure. God had opened all the doors for him to be successful in spreading the gospel. But Paul was paralyzed by worry and anxiety about his Christian family in Corinth. He wanted desperately to hear that they had responded well to the letter that we know Paul agonized over as he wrote it. He was disciplining his spiritual children. Paul sought news from Titus that might give him peace and comfort so that he could go on with the ministry of God's call on his life.

The news he received was not from Titus. It was from God Himself.

God reminded Paul of who he is in Jesus Christ? He essentially said, "Paul, remember who you are!" "Remember what Christ has done!" "Remember the cross!"

Isn't it amazing how we all need reminders of the basic truth of the Gospel? We get sidelined by life. People near and dear to us disappoint us. Things just happen. As the years go by not one of us is immune to the ravages of this fallen world. Not one of us escapes unaffected. Scripture says, "When you encounter various trials", not if. The reality of that, particularly when the people you desperately love and care about are involved—a spouse, children, a mom, dad, grandchildren, close friends, a church in Corinth.....the reality of that can stop us in our tracks if we become paralyzed by worry and anxiety .

But as followers of Christ, we know that this is not our home. We know things are going to happen. We are resident aliens. We are strangers and exiles. We are sojourners here. We know we are not always going to be happy. This world is not as God originally created it. God is our home.

So based on that truth, Paul tells us at least three things God reminded him of that lifted him out of his anguish and worry. Three things that encouraged him and set him free. And we should well take note of what he says.

First, he says, the victory is won! Everything is going to be ok!

“But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession...”  
2 Corinthians 2:14a, ESV

“In the Messiah, in Christ, God leads us from place to place in one perpetual victory parade.”  
2 Corinthians 2:14a, The Message

In but two words Paul appeals to an image that anyone in the Roman Empire would be familiar with..... the Roman army. He puts before them the image of THE TRIUMPH. It was the parade of victory, it was the triumphal procession.

It was the highest honor that could ever be paid a Roman General. After a victorious military campaign that expanded Roman territory and decisive enough that the troops could be brought home, the ‘commander in chief’ was awarded a Triumph. They did not happen often.

But when they did, oh my. What a celebration!!

The procession through the streets of Rome to the capitol was grand. First, members of the Senate, then came the trumpeters and the spoils taken from the conquered land rolling by on hundreds of horse drawn carts and wagons. Then came elaborate models and paintings of the victorious battles. Close behind would

be a massive white bull that was to be sacrificed to the gods. Behind the bull, the poor, wretched captives of war followed, only to be imprisoned or more than likely executed. All the while the trumpets sounded the drums pounded and a sweet smelling incense filled the air and thousands of flowers were cast onto the street.

Finally, the Roman General rode in a chariot drawn by four horses. He was clad in a purple tunic, embroidered with golden palm leaves. He held an ivory scepter with a Roman eagle on top. Over his head a slave held the crown of Jupiter. The general's family followed him in this triumphant celebration.

At the very end came the army of thousands of soldiers, all wearing their uniforms and shouting, "Triumph! Triumph! Triumph!"

It was a pretty impressive scene that probably happened only once in a lifetime. This is the picture that Paul had in mind. Put on the whole armor of God and enter the TRIUMPH.

He said.....

"In the Messiah, in Christ, God leads us from place to place in one perpetual victory parade."

"But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession."

Paul was looking for Titus and a reassuring word. But God gave him the image of being in this Triumphant parade, following Christ. God was reminding Paul (and you and me) that "*Christ is the Victor! He is the Conquering General. He leads us in triumphant procession. The victory is won! We now march behind him, not to prison or death, but to reign with Him in eternity.. We are soldiers of Christ in this present darkness. We are Ambassadors of Christ to this world. We are citizens of heaven.*"

When life has delivered a body blow, when your spirit is not at rest, remember that you are in the parade of Triumph. You are more than a conqueror in Christ Jesus, always and forever. This transcendent truth frees us from worry and anxiety and the paralysis of fear and loss. It assures us that in any circumstance, we have hope in Jesus Christ and "...He leads us in triumphant procession."

Well Paul gives us a second truth to consider:

It's another image but it's not for our minds eye. This new image Paul gives us is the one of aroma, the fragrance of Christ Himself.

As the General and the soldiers and their chariots passed by, hundreds of attendants threw flowers in the air and on the streets, they swung burning incense giving the passing parade a sweet fragrance, an aroma of triumphal procession. The “smell of victory”!

Paul says, “Christ....through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.”

“The fragrance...of the knowledge of (Christ).” “...through us!”

Paul, once again, bids us come into the truth about being in Christ. Not only are we in the triumphal procession, those who are in Christ Jesus have the aroma of Christ. The fragrance of having been with him, spending time with Him, being in his presence continually; the fragrance of Christ who is our hope of glory. In this sense, those who are truly in Christ ‘smell’ like Christ.

Maybe this word picture will help.

My absolute favorite pizza in all the world is an “Around the World” with no Anchovies from the Fleur de Lis on Government Street. I’ve been eating that pizza since 1964. They’ve been serving since 1947! I’ve tried others and when I’m through, I just wish that I’d not ventured out. The taste of those little squares, crispy and doughy, season pasted pieces covered with Italian sausage, pepperoni, onions and all kinds of secret stuff. Man you can’t beat it. Becky and I get it “To Go” with regularity. On very rare occasions, we will actually go to the Fleur and stay there and eat. And you know what? When we get home, our clothes go directly into the laundry hamper. Why? They’ve been making pizzas in that place for 70 years, right?! Just walk in and walk out. Go back to your office and all the folks there will say, “Man, you’ve been to the Fleur de Lis haven’t you?” When I pick up To Go, my car smells like the Fleur de Lis, my clothes smell like the Fleur de Lis and I walk into the house, and the house smells like....Fleur de Lis. It’s not that it doesn’t smell good. It does. That first jolt of the smell of a Fleur de Lis pizza causes me to salivate. I cannot wait to taste it. But, after a while, the garlic and pepperoni and fennel just become too much to take.

But not so with the fragrance of Christ. When you are a follower of Christ, people smell Christ on you. When you know Christ and His Holy Spirit indwells you, you have the fragrance of Christ. The honor and privilege of walking about, serving Christ, sharing Christ, living Christ and presenting Christ to an unbelieving world, that privilege is such an honor, that nothing should disquiet our spirits for long.....

Nothing should cause us worry or anguish or loss that paralyzes us. We are privileged to stand on the truth that “Christ spreads the knowledge of Him through us everywhere”. What a privilege! What an honor!

If you were with us in the gym two weeks ago Saturday when we hosted so many international students, you would have smelled Christ. The fragrance of Christ burst forth with every greeting and embrace and conversation. Christ was spreading the knowledge of Himself through us to those special guests.

You are “The fragrance...of the knowledge of (Christ).”

Paul sights a third truth that released him from the bondage of anxiety and worry. And this truth actually comprises three distinct truths. So please hang in there with me. Paul says...

“For we are the aroma of Christ to God, among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.”

First and foremost we are the ‘aroma of Christ to God’. That truth alone is worthy of a sermon series. Throughout the Old Testament we read of sweet smelling fragrances offered to God. Burnt offerings provided a *sweet savour unto the Lord*. Noah’s burnt offerings after the flood were *considered a soothing aroma*. Moses *made incense* to the Lord.

So when scripture says we are the ‘aroma of Christ to God’ this is in keeping with all of Scripture.

Paul says in Ephesians that “Christ loved us and gave himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

And in his first letter to the church at Corinth he says, “Now you are the Body of Christ and each one of you a part of it.” 1 Cor. 12:27

This is why Paul says to us in Romans “offer yourselves a living sacrifice, pleasing to God...”

Romans 12:1

When God smells us, he smells the aroma of Christ.

When God sees us, he sees Christ.

When God looks upon our sin, He sees Christ’s righteousness.

When God judges our sin, His guilty verdict is on the one who knew no sin.  
When God's wrath is exacted on our sin, it is wrath upon His only Son.  
When God raised His Son in victory, He raised us.  
When God welcomed His Son back to eternity, He welcomes us.  
When God smells us, he smells Christ.  
"We are the aroma of Christ to God."

This is why scriptures says "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints."

This is why scripture says that "We do not mourn as those who have no hope."

We have nothing to worry about. We have nothing to fear. The truth is whether we live or die we are the Lord's.

Second, he says in this passage, we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved. This makes sense doesn't it.....that God is pleased and honored and exalted when His people are being saved? When His people are walking in faith? As we extend hospitality to the international students, as we gather with the homeless for a meal, as we invite special needs children for special times on Friday nights, as we read with students at Buchanan and Gardere schools, as we take communion to those who are confined to their homes, as we send financial support to our missionaries and so many other things that we do as the Body of Christ in this .....in short.....when the Body of Christ here on earth lives obediently to Christ and as Christ in loving one another in all these ways, God is glorified.

We are the aroma of Christ to each other. And we are the aroma of Christ to God each and every day as the Holy Spirit does His work through us...a fragrance, an aroma permeating the whole world bringing glory to the Father. And think of it, over the next weeks and months we can be the fragrance of Christ to those hurting in Houston. What an opportunity!

Well, third, look what Paul says in this passage, "We are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved..... and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life."

John Calvin said, “The force of the gospel is such that it is never preached in vain, but is effectual, leading to life or death.”

Have you ever heard it said that your life is a Bible for others to read? Well, this is what Paul is saying. The lives of those who follow Christ give testimony to the reality of the resurrected Christ living within individuals and literally living through them as the Body of Christ in this space and time. Remember, Scripture says “you are the Body of Christ!”

Tim Keller, the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in NY, says of these faithful followers that they live “compassionately and courageously and in doing so their lives are attractive and, at the same time, offensive.” How can this be?

When Christ is proclaimed through His Holy Spirit working through the words and actions of His people, one of two things happen:

1. People are attracted to Jesus. They repent and accept the gospel and God’s grace. His people are saved and are being saved. When God’s Holy Spirit lives out the life of Christ through His people, His grace is proclaimed. The compassion of His people is palpable. It is a sweet aroma to Him. It is the aroma of Christ. It is a sweet aroma of salvation to those who are being saved. It is the fragrance of life eternal in Christ Jesus. We are the aroma of Christ to God, a fragrance from life to life.

And, when God’s Word is proclaimed through His Holy Spirit working through the words and actions of his people, there is another result:

2. People are offended. They reject the gospel and God’s grace. The aroma of Christ to God through His church and His Word is repugnant to them. It is a stench. It is an aroma of accountability. It is an aroma of guilt. It is an aroma that reveals their sin. It is light in darkness. It is the aroma of death to death.

In both cases it is the aroma of Christ, the sweet fragrance of Christ to God that gives Him glory.



God's holiness and righteousness, His love and mercy have been declared on the cross as "he made Christ to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." 2 Cor. 5:21

This is all too glorious. Paul is lifted up (and so should we be) by just the thought of the triumphant procession of which he is a part. His spirit is no longer restless or worried but totally at rest in the knowledge that we are the aroma of Christ to God the Father, that we are the fragrance of Christ everywhere we go, to those who are being saved and to those who are perishing when they reject the Savior. We are, collectively, the Body of Christ to the world. It is all so magnificent and glorious that Paul asks the question, "Who is sufficient for these things?"

The answer.....none of us....not one of us.....not Paul....or Peter or James or John...not Gerrit, Whitney, Josh, Jim or Darin.....nor anyone of us.

As I considered this text in preparation for this morning, I wrestled over and over again with this thought. Not only am I not sufficient or capable or deserving of any of this, but I know full well that there are many, many times when I am not the fragrance of Christ to those who are perishing. I am the sinner that Christ saved by grace. I too often stumble in my weakness. I can too often be called a hypocrite. Too often those things I would do, I do not do, and those things that I struggle so hard not to do, I do.

Paul understood this. He said, "...we are (not) sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God..." 2 Corinthians 3:5

Paul says later in this very same letter, "...He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." 2 Cor. 12:9

Whether we live or die we are the Lord's....forever. Everything is going to be ok. We are in the triumphal procession. We are the fragrance of Christ everywhere and the aroma of Christ to God. What a great and gracious God we have. In this present darkness, He gives us life and victory and calls us to follow Him in the TRIUMPHAL parade. AMEN!