“Smelly Faith”

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John 12:1-8

At my grandparents’ house on the Old Mountain Road in Statesville, North Carolina, a yellow, handmade cabinet stood outside of the bathroom on the main floor. Inside the cabinet, were what seemed like a million, fluffy towels, waiting for us to grab on our way in for a Saturday night bath. This cabinet was a staple, like many of the other odds and ends and pieces of furniture in my grandparents house. Like the guarantee that we would go to a buffet restaurant after church on Sunday, have a long nap afterward, and sandwiches for dinner in the evening, the fixtures in that home rarely changed.

When it came time to begin to clean the house out after my grandmother moved into assisted living and my grandfather downsized to an apartment in town, we sorted through the odds and ends and began the task of figuring out who would take what. I wasn’t super interested in my grandmother’s silver or in my grandfather’s memorabilia from his time at Davidson or Union Seminary.

Instead, I wanted that cabinet. So I claimed it and we moved it to my parents’ house in Durham, where it now stands outside another bathroom in another North Carolina town.

A few years later, after my grandmother had died, I went downstairs to our family room and looked at the cabinet. I opened the wooden door, put my head in, and inhaled. And instantly, I was transported to my grandparents’ home. Instantly, I was sitting with my grandmother in the rocker, listening to records, and singing along with her. In that moment, I was transported. I kept my head in the cabinet, taking in full, deep breaths, treasuring the memories of my grandmother. After I had gotten my fill, I shut the door firmly, hoping to keep some of that smell in as long as I could.

I went upstairs to find my mom and told her — Grandmommy’s cabinet still smelled like Grandmommy. She followed me back downstairs, where I instructed her to stick her head in the cabinet. She did as she was told, wonderful mother that she is, and inhaled deeply. She stood up and told me very matter of factly, that it wasn’t so much the smell of my grandmother, but the smell of the Skin So Soft lotion by Avon which she wore faithfully every day. She had stored her lotion in the cabinet with the towels and slowly the scent had taken over.

I love my mother, but she can also be the world’s most practical person — she is an accountant, after all — and to her, there was a logical explanation behind the smell. The smell wasn’t my grandmother, but the lotion she used. But to me, every time I stuck my head in there, it wasn’t the friendly neighborhood Avon lady I smelled but my grandmother.

Rudyard Kipling once wrote, “Smells are surer than sounds or sights…to make your heart-strings crack.”

Smells are tied so closely to emotion, that they can even make us feel emotions when we encounter them. Think about how the way fresh cut grass makes you feel, or the smell of suntan lotion, or the smell of a Christmas tree freshly decorated in your living room.

Cognitive neuroscientist Rachel Herz explains that, “The neurological interconnection between the sense of smell and emotion is uniquely intimate. The areas of the brain that process smell and emotion are as intertwined and codependent as any two regions of the brain could be.”

In the Bible, smell and emotion are often connected in surprising ways.

When we (if we!) think about the ways that the senses are used in the Bible, smell might be the last on our list.

We can think through the sight of God’s creation in the Garden, we can hear the voice of God at Jesus’s baptism proclaiming, “This is my Son. My beloved.” We can taste the miracle of the loaves and the fishes. And we can feel and touch with Thomas as he puts his hands in the resurrected Christ’s wounds.

But scent? That’s weird. If we take some time to sit and think about the different ways that smells and scents could be featured in the Biblical story, we might be tempted to turn our noses up. After all — we’re talking about a time before deodorant, before daily showers, and before Glade plugins. If we think about scent in the Bible, we might assume that it is used in a negative way; so many smells can be offensive.

And yet, the Bible is filled with examples of pleasing odors, especially odors that are pleasing to God. In Genesis, after the flood waters recede, Noah presented to God burnt-offerings on an altar that he had built. The text tells us, “And when the Lord smelt the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground because of humankind.’” In later temple worship, the high priests burned incense in the temple twice daily, and the smell of the incense floated up to God and was pleasing to God.

And in today’s story, we are offered a story in which a pleasant smell is the most important sense.

Jesus, along with at least a few of his disciples is in Bethany, at the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. The are familiar characters in the Jesus narrative — Lazarus, whom Jesus has recently raised from the dead, and Martha, who, in Luke is the one who was so distracted by her preparations for dinner for Jesus, she gets upset when her sister, Mary, simply sits at the feet of Jesus, listening to what he had to say. These are the dinner hosts for today’s text. John paints a lovely domestic scene as he reminds us of their backstory — “Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.” John tells us that Martha served, which is what we would expect, if we know Martha. And then there’s Mary.

John tells us that, “Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’s feet, and wiped them with her hair.”

The smell of the nard fills the entire home. And it is inescapable. John tells us that the house was filled with the fragrance.

It is helpful to remember where this text is placed within the larger John narrative. In the chapter immediately before it, Lazarus dies. Jesus goes to the tomb where Lazarus has been placed, and commands for the stone to be removed so that he might go inside. Martha protests, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.” Here, we get an example of a not so pleasant smell. The stench Martha refers to further emphasizes Lazarus’s dead state. As the coroner from “The Wizard of Oz” would say, “He’s not only merely dead, but really most sincerely dead.”

The stench of the tomb in chapter 11 is juxtaposed with the beautiful fragrance of chapter 12. Where the scent of Lazarus in the tomb represents death and decay and some doubt, the fragrance of Mary’s oil poured out on Jesus’s feet is a sensory reminder of her faith and love in Christ.

The fragrance of love’s actions fills the air and all inhale it. The scent was everywhere. It would have been easy for those present at Lazarus’s home that day to tune Mary out, had she and Jesus been having a conversation. It would have been all too easy to simply go into another room and thus miss out in this display of discipleship, but instead, the perfume that Mary uses to anoint Jesus permeates the space — so much so, that it is impossible to miss.

Judas certainly doesn’t miss it. In fact, he protests that Mary has wasted an entire year’s salary on this jar of nard.

Are Judas’s protests reasonable? If we ignore for a minute, John’s asides to us, the readers, that Judas will be the one who betrays Jesus and is also the one who stole from the common purse), if we ignore that, Judas’s protests might not seem to be so ridiculous. Former Emory Professor Fred Craddock wonders, when times are tough, is it appropriate to fill the church with poinsettias at Christmas and lilies at Easter? If Jesus has been preaching about selling all that we have and giving the money to the poor, doesn’t it seem irresponsible and against Jesus’s teachings to spend an entire year’s salary on perfume? It’s not an unreasonable question to ask.

But Jesus responds with, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.”

The nard that Mary is using was an essential oil from the Himalayas that was often used in burial rituals. Mary hadn’t just gone to the neighborhood organic market to the essential oil aisle and picked something that smelled good after sniffing from a few vials. She had picked an oil that was difficult to obtain (and therefore was expensive) and which was used to prepare those already dead for burial.

For Jesus, Mary has put her faith in action. She understands Christ’s teachings and has prepared him for burial by anointing him. Where the disciples are often in the “ye of little faith” camp, Mary has placed all of her faith in Jesus. And Judas just doesn’t get it.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes that through us, “[God] spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing God. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.”

Lauren Winner, an Episcopal priest from the great city of Durham reflects on this passage from 2nd Corinthians, saying that, “while Jesus emits a distinct scent, that scent doesn’t smell the same to all people —or, alternatively, the same scent doesn’t smell the same to the same person all the time. Those who are turned toward God will find the smell of Jesus-in-us delightful; those who are turned away will find it noxious.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

In today’s text, Judas has turned away from God, and so he only smells death and wasted expense. He isn’t capable of fully realizing the meaning behind Mary’s actions. He doesn’t realize that Mary is anointing Jesus for burial and in doing so, is inviting everyone in the house to join her in that act. In anointing Jesus, she is inviting others into her act of discipleship.

In fact, Jesus emphasizes Mary’s invitation into discipleship in the very next chapter. In chapter 13, Jesus washes the disciples’ feet himself. He lowers himself and places himself in a servant position and washes their feet. When he is finished, he compels them to do likewise. He says to them, “So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” For Jesus, we should all be like Mary, willing to sacrifice everything — money, power, status, incredibly expensive jars of nard, to show others how to be a true disciple of Christ.

Friends Christ calls us to practice the kind of smelly faith that we see in Mary. John asked me why I didn’t name my sermon “Aromatic Faith” or something more pleasant. But in today’s text, the oil that Mary uses is one reserved for death. Its smell would have reminded the disciples of death and would have forced them to confront their own deaths and the death of their Teacher. But Mary did what was right. She recognized Christ for who he was and anointed him for burial, knowing that with his death would come his resurrection. It can be argued that it was Mary’s smelly faith that is the center of John’s Gospel — a faith that points to Jesus as giver of life. We are called to live a life that directs the attention of those around us to the Christ who loves us, even to the point of death. We are called to practice a smelly faith.

I wonder if over the days and weeks after this intimate moment between Mary and Jesus, if Mary could still smell the nard in her hair. I wonder if she caught whiffs of it and she was mourning Christ’s death on Holy Saturday. I wonder if she carried the scent with her as she carried the good news of Christ’s resurrection from person to person.

Friends, may we be like Mary, carrying the scent of Christ with us from person to person. May we be Christ’s smelly disciples in this world.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. Lauren Winner. Wearing God: Clothing, Laughter, Fire, and Other Overlooked Ways of Meeting God [↑](#footnote-ref-1)