

Scents of Life and Death
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Lent 5A
John 11:38-44; 12:1-8

Among our five senses, none is keener than our sense of smell—although my wife wonders about mine. We regularly go through this little ritual. She asks, “Can you smell that?” I know it’s not a good odor; it’s something musty or moldy, gassy or smoky, gamey or sweaty. It’s faint but perceptible to her alert nose. Still, she wants my confirmation—“Don’t you smell that?”

I almost always say, “No dear,” not because I’m messing with her, but because I really don’t smell it. We go back and forth, each getting increasingly more irritated, until we just drop it until the next odiferous episode.

Apparently, I’m not very good with subtle scents. But I do pick up the BIG SMELLS: the sharp pungency of skunk or sulfur or sour milk, but also the rapturous aroma of fresh baked bread, honeysuckle, or fine perfume. I get the strong odors on both ends of the spectrum.

It’s amazing the range of smells available to us (even the nasally challenged like myself): sweet and sour, fragrant and rancid, spanning the gamut from *life to death*.

In a wonderful novel by Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid, the narrator tells his story to a dinner companion at a café in Lahore, Pakistan. He often spices his tale with comments about the café’s ambience, like this vivid passage:

Ah, I see that you have detected a scent. Nothing escapes you; your senses are as acute as those of a fox in the wild. It is rather pleasant, is it not? Yes, you are right: it *is* jasmine. It comes from the table beside ours, where that family has just taken their seats for dinner.

What a contrast: the paleness of those [jasmine] buds—strung with needle and thread into a fluffy bracelet—against the darkness of that lady’s skin. And what a contrast, again: the delicacy of their perfume against the robust smell of roasting meat! It is remarkable indeed how we human beings are capable of delighting in the mating call of a flower while we are surrounded by the charred carcasses of our fellow animals—but then we are remarkable creatures.

Perhaps it is in our nature to recognize subconsciously the link between mortality and procreation—between . . . the finite and the infinite.

We are indeed remarkable creatures, not least in our capacity to smell death and life, sometimes simultaneously. We are remarkable creatures in the image of God, who after the flood, “smelled the pleasing odor” of Noah’s sacrifice and vowed never to destroy every living thing by water again.

Ironically, however, this “pleasing odor” comes from Noah’s *burnt* offerings of every species preserved in the ark. The fragrance of “the charred carcasses of our fellow animals”—as Hamid puts it. Strange, eerie, disturbing—but *remarkable* all the same.

The Lazarus story features commingled scents of life and death—powerful odors from the most pleasant to the most putrid. The *numbers* tell the tale.

Lazarus has been entombed *four days* when Jesus orders the stone rolled away. Politely, but firmly, sister Martha does the math—“Lord, after *four days* the spices we used to anoint Lazarus’ body will be overwhelmed by the disgusting stench of our brother’s decaying body.”

Jesus is not deterred, however. The tombstone comes off, the terrible stink wafts out, and Jesus prays. And suddenly—remarkably—four-day-old death gives way to new life. Lazarus comes out in his grave clothes, smelling to high heaven no doubt—but nobody cares now. The spring-like fragrance of fresh life deodorizes the entire scene.

Speaking of sweet fragrance, the next episode—a dinner party at the risen Lazarus’ home—features sister Mary’s anointing Jesus’ feet with perfume. Not with a dab or two, mind you, but—notice the numbers again—with *twelve ounces of pure, costly nard*. Imagine a coke can *full* of perfume dumped on Jesus’ feet and pooling in a puddle around him. The text says, “The house *was filled* with the fragrance of the perfume.” I should think so.

Why does Mary do this? To express her deep love for Jesus, certainly; but more than that, Jesus interprets Mary’s action as a kind of pre-anointing for his burial. It seems that Mary, sensing that Jesus’ death was imminent, had purchased this expensive perfume to anoint his corpse. But instead of waiting for his death, she chooses to anoint him *now*, while he’s still alive and can appreciate it.

Moreover, by suffusing the house with this bright, bracing aroma, she sustains an atmosphere of joy and vitality that overcomes, at least for the moment, any sad prospects of death and despair.

So both scenes—the one at Lazarus’ tomb, the other in his home—though featuring opposite smells and the specter of death, ultimately leave the fresh scent of hope and life in the air . . . *BUT not without resistance*.

Interestingly, each case presents a negative voice or, should we say, a sensitive nose that detects a bad odor—something that’s not right, **something with Jesus** in fact he needs to answer for.

In the first episode, *Martha* objects, as we’ve already mentioned: “Lord, after four days, Lazarus’ body will reek.” But this is more than a chronological and biochemical observation. These four days represent something else that stinks from both Martha and Mary’s perspective.

Earlier that day, when Jesus first arrived, each sister said to him (at different times): “Lord, if you’d been here, my brother would not have died.” Although a confession of faith—

“Lord, we believe you could’ve healed Lazarus”—this is also a *confrontation of failure*—“You loved Lazarus. You love us. So why didn’t you come sooner? Where were you when we needed you?”

That may seem a bit unfair. Even in our jet-set age, sometimes, despite our best intentions, we just can’t get to a dying loved one’s side before it’s too late. But this case is more complicated, because earlier we learn when word of Lazarus’ illness first reached Jesus, he *deliberately* “stayed two days longer where he was.”

He didn’t drop everything and rush to Bethany. Even if he had, he might not have come in time. But still, this rather casual delay is perplexing, with the result that he didn’t arrive until *way* too late—four days into the noxious rotting of Lazarus’ corpse.

Now, to be sure, there’s a purpose to Jesus’ delay: he anticipates raising Lazarus’ dead body in order to glorify God and instruct his disciples. Four days in the grave? Not a problem. And indeed, Jesus does bring Lazarus back to life, providing the disciples a marvelous faith lesson they’ll never forget.

Good for them. *But what about poor Martha and Mary?* What about their anguished four days of grief? What about Lazarus for that matter? What, if anything, was he aware of during this limbo? Well none of this really matters, does it? All is well and forgotten when Lazarus comes out of the tomb *alive!*

It’s great we have a happy ending—a final infusion of fresh air—but those four long preceding days are not so easily forgotten. Their foul odor still lingers: “If only you’d been here, we could’ve been spared a lot of pain.”

If only, if only . . . how many times have we said that? Achh . . . if only I’d done this or *not* done that—things would be a lot different. If only *you* had done this; if only *you* had been there. If only, *God, You* had acted sooner; if only *You* had stepped in and done something—we wouldn’t be in this mess.

Our frustration with God’s sense of timing is one of our greatest spiritual struggles. The writer of Ecclesiastes certainly wrestled with this. You know that familiar text—“For everything there’s a season: a time to be born, time to die . . . time to weep, time to laugh,” and so on—fourteen couplets about time’s ebb and flow.

And then the writer concludes: “God has made everything suitable for its time. God has put a sense of past and future into our minds.” We instinctively sense something about God’s timetable—*Yet*—here’s the kicker—“we *cannot find out* what God has done from the beginning to the end.” We know God has a purpose for every moment—but most of the time we don’t know what that purpose is.

That really bothers the author of Ecclesiastes—and if we’re honest, it bothers *us* too. We alone among God’s creatures have the capacity to contemplate the passage of time and our own

mortality, but we remain unable to know for certain what tomorrow will bring or when we're going to die. Is that a blessing or a curse? I'm not entirely sure.

But I'm pretty sure we need to live not in a past we cannot change or a future we cannot control—but in the present God graciously gives us—God's eternal *now*. We need not waste our precious time worrying about what might have been "*if only*" that had happened OR what might be around the bend "*if only*" this falls into place. Rather than "if only," we need to focus on "what now": what does this fresh moment, this critical hour, offer us?

The same old same old? "Nothing new under the sun," as Ecclesiastes argues? Not necessarily. Dare we live and believe in a promising *now*? At Lazarus' tomb, Jesus reminds Martha—"Didn't I tell you if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" Well, this is it—this is that moment, Martha—four stinking days after Lazarus' death.

Forget the math; forget the biochemistry. Take a deep, deep breath . . . Ahh, can you smell that, Martha? That's the fresh scent of renewed life, the fragrance of God's glory right here, right now.

"Lazarus, come out *now*. And the rest of you, Quit standing there with wide eyes and open mouths. Loose the man and let him go. Don't remain bound up in your fears and frustrations. It's time to flex and stretch, jump and dance, and freely live this moment to the fullest."

This life-affirming emphasis carries into the table scene in Lazarus' home. *But again it's resisted*. This time *Judas* raises the objection, and this time the problem is not *how long* Jesus took to arrive, but *how much* expensive ointment Mary dumps on him.

The *cost* especially distresses Judas (It's the economy, stupid!). "Lord, why was this perfume not sold for 300 denarii [about a year's wages] and the money given to the poor?" Again it's a *numbers* issue: 4 days, 12 ounces, 300 denarii, 5 loaves, 2 fishes—Jesus doesn't add things up like we do. He's very comfortable with the "new math"—*God's math*—which often ill fits our calculus.

Although Treasurer Judas cares more about his own pocket than the plight of the poor, he has a point. Jesus, we've got a lot of poor folk barely getting by, and you've been their champion. Couldn't this money have been put to better use than your own comfort and pleasure?

And Jesus' response—"You always have the poor with you, but you don't always have me"—sounds like a self-absorbed brush-off. It's all about *me*, not that never-ending swarm of pesky poor people.

But, of course, that's *not* Jesus' point. He doesn't have a dime to his name. He doesn't demand this fancy cologne or commission Mary's salon service. It just happens. Jesus is manifestly *not* about himself and what's poured out for him. He pours his life out for others, not least the poor and destitute.

It's not about "me." But again—it *is* about *now*—this moment. This is a joyous moment of *celebrating life*: Lazarus has returned from the dead, for goodness' sake. We thought he was gone and now he's here talking and eating and laughing with us. Let's enjoy this moment.

This is also a poignant moment of *demonstrating love*: Mary's overcome with love for Jesus and she can't contain herself. She has to let it flow. She knows she may not have another chance, and she's not going to let this moment slip by. Love makes you a little crazy some time, makes you go over the top.

That's OK, Jesus says. Leave her alone. The time is short and the time is right for Mary to show how much she loves me. This may indeed be her last chance, and by the way: the more she loves me, the more she will love the poor and pour herself out for them as I always have and will soon do in total self-emptying on the cross.

Precious moments: catching the revitalizing scent of life and love amid the stench of destruction and discrimination.

Precious *now* moments—like *this* moment—for us. Don't resist it. Exhale all your doubt and despair. And then inhale a deep, fresh, cleansing breath of God's vibrant Spirit. God's fragrance fills this house right now. Let's take it all in, deeply and fully.

Amen.

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