

## **A Sweet Smell**

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year A

A Sermon for Every Sunday

*John 11:1-12:8*

Some people's mothers told them not to talk about religion and politics in public.

Well, I grew up in a family where we talked about politics all the time, and my mother told me not to talk about religion or smell in public.

Talking about smell, she said, was fundamentally declassée and might make people think about feet.

As a preacher, and a divinity school professor, I've generally found it hard to avoid talking about religion in public, but I usually manage the other half of mom's dictum.

And then you get to the middle of the Gospel of John and it's kind of hard to avoid the topic of olfaction. So, today's sermon is about smell. And actually, in its way, it is also about feet. So, apologies to my mother who I know is rolling over in her urn.

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The house was filled with the fragrance of perfume.

The section of the Gospel of John we're in today is deeply obsessed with smell. We have the story of Lazarus, one of Jesus's best friends having died. And Jesus pays a graveside visit and orders the stone laid across the cave where Lazarus is buried to be rolled away. "But Lord," says Lazarus's sister, Martha, "he's been in there for four days, so there's a bad odor," Or as the King James more piquantly puts it: "He stinketh," says Martha. But Jesus orders the stone moved away and then he raises Lazarus from the dead.

And then let me tell you what happens after that reading. A few verses after that reading, Lazarus throws a dinner party, how we all respond to being resurrected, right? He throws a dinner party, a dinner party that becomes a sensory extravaganza.

Martha is there. She is, as usual, serving the dinner. She's been in the kitchen all day cooking an elaborate lentil stew, an elaborate tray of perogies, baking a three-layer chocolate cake. And as usual her sister Mary is nowhere to be found when Martha is doing all of this cooking.

But then here comes Mary.

The Gospel of John tells us that she comes bearing a pint of perfume, and her hair is down and tangled, and she bathes Jesus with the perfume. She saturates him.

And the whole house is filled with the fragrance, the Gospel tells us.

The perfume Mary used was nard, which smells kind of like Old Spice—a wooded smell, like a forest, or like moss.

And nard has not just a particular aroma, but it's also been thought, both then and now, that nard has particular healing properties.

And in particular, both then and now, people have thought nard promoted uterine health.

So, this seems sort of odd, maybe.

Why didn't Mary perfume Jesus with the scent of lemons, a smell that's thought to produce feelings of peace, or with sandalwood, which is said to cure both dry skin and irritability. Why scent Jesus with a fragrance known to ensure a healthy uterus? It's a little odd.

Or maybe it's a hint.

This perfuming, Jesus tells us in the Gospel of John, is a preparation for his death.

And the death that Jesus will meet soon after this dinner party is a particular kind of death. It is a death that brings about new life.

So, Mary is making Jesus not only perfumed, but reproductively healthy so that he can birth new life for us on the cross.

The house was filled with the fragrance of perfume.

It's not typical for Scripture to speak so extravagantly about smell. Why does the Gospel of John want us to know about the scent of Lazarus's house, or Mary's hands and hair, the now woody scent of Jesus' body, the smell of moss?

Have you ever noticed how smelling something can trigger a memory? You walk out of your house after the first snow of winter and the scent of that newly fallen snow just takes you back to childhood sledding; or you smell pencil shavings and suddenly you're sitting in your desk in Mrs. Miller's fifth grade classroom.

Neuroscientists have found that, because of the physical proximity of our olfactory nerve to our amygdala and hippocampus, which are the parts of our brain that largely control mood and memory, because the olfactory nerve is so close to our mood and memory processors, smell can trigger memories and emotions more powerfully, and more quickly, than hearing or sight or touch. Of course, hearing an old song can summon a memory, but smell does even that more powerfully.

One of the particular emotional responses smell can produce is something psychologists call olfactory comfort. That is the term psychologists give to the way that scent can help calm people who are distressed by the absence of a person they love.

"Olfactory comfort."

That is why, if your beloved is away on a trip, you might sleep in his pajamas. It's why a nurse in Minnesota, having observed that a child feeling intense separation anxiety is reassured by a garment with his mother's smell, patented a soft shirt that could be easily converted into a blanket so mom could wear the shirt for a few hours before heading off to work or heading out on a date, and baby, now wrapped in and comforted by her scent, will be less hysterical when his mother steps out the door.

Mary is not just preparing Jesus for his death. She is also preparing herself for his death. She's preparing herself for his absence and for her own grief.

So now whenever she smells nard, whenever Lazarus or Martha smell nard, the scent will trigger a memory, a memory of Jesus. Nard will be marked with his memory and perhaps the scent will soothe them. Years after his death, when his friends smell nard, the scent will, in a way, bring Jesus close.

So, Mary is not just preparing Jesus for his death.

She's also preparing herself.

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Now this whole passage from the raising of Lazarus to this dinner party and nard anointing, this whole passage in the Gospel of John is one of the last discussions of smell in the Bible, but it's not the absolute last reference to smell.

A few books later, in his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul will write a phrase that is very familiar to some of us. I'm an Episcopalian and we use this phrase from Paul in the Episcopal Church all the time.

"Walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself an offering and a sacrifice to God." To me this is a familiar verse because this is the verse that Episcopal priests usually quote halfway through our Sunday service as we pivot from the scripture readings and the sermon to the Eucharist. Walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, etc. This is Ephesians 5:2.

But, for reasons I have been completely unable to discover, Episcopal priests never quote the whole verse.

The whole verse actually says:

"And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savor."

Or, as another translation has it:

"Walk in love, as Christ also loved us and gave Himself for us *as* an offering and a sacrifice to God, into an aroma of a sweet smell."

Priests never quote the whole thing. It's possible my mother got to them.

Well, what was the sweet smell?

Probably Paul means it metaphorically. He means to connect Jesus' sacrifice to all the Old Testament sacrifices of incense which, Exodus and Leviticus are always telling us, were acceptable to God because they smelled so lovely.

But I want to read Paul a little less metaphorically. I want to say it was the nard. The sweet-smelling savor was that pint of nard in which Mary had lately bathed Jesus.

We know that on the cross Jesus felt alone. We know he had been abandoned by some of his dearest friends.

And we know that on the cross he cried out in dereliction, sensing that he'd been abandoned even by God the Father.

Maybe on the cross, the aroma of nard called to mind Mary and Lazarus. Maybe the aroma soothed him and made him feel less alone.

And then there is another use of smell, even later in the Bible.

This is in Revelation, the very last book of the Bible, where the writer says that the prayers of the saints are golden bowls full of incense.

It's an arresting image.

When you pray, your prayers are incense, and your body, the vessel of the prayer, is a golden bowl.

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Some years ago, my friend Robert died. About 14 months after his death, Robert's widow, Maisie, asked me to keep her company while she sorted through his clothes. She was giving some of them to their nephews, and some to Goodwill, but she was keeping his shirts, the button-down oxford shirts he'd worn every day to his office. Maisie now wore them herself, to sleep in, or to run errands, and she swore that she could still smell Robert in those shirts over a year after he died.

Smell is haunted by absence. The baby longing for his mother, the widow pining for her mate. Smell keeps us close to one another in our absence.

I left Maisie's house thinking, maybe in her way, Maisie is a picture of God. Maybe we should picture God as a widow. God's beloved spouse has been taken away, and God mourns. The funeral happens on a Tuesday. There are the casseroles and the sympathetic notes. God receives a few visits and phone calls, from angels, perhaps. Although some of the angels stay away because they "don't want to impose." And then a few weeks pass, and the angels forget and go back to their seraphic business, of singing hymns and delivering messages and mending their robes, and God is left alone in God's grief. God is beside Himself with the separation. And God puts on the robe God's beloved had always worn, and God's grief is eased a bit by the smell.

That is what our absence feels like to God. Those hours and days or sometimes years when we are far off and ignore God, when we remain at a distance, this absence is not philosophical and abstract, it's real and present to God. And so, we come together on Sunday to pray.

Or by ourselves, tonight or tomorrow or the day after that, we return to God in prayer.

And our prayers are incense. They smell like moss, or like the floor of a forest. God is grieved by our absence, but our incense-prayers soothe him. The house was filled with the fragrance of perfume.

—*Lauren Winner* © 2023