

What's That Smell?

Rev. Nancy Willet
John 12: 1-8

5th Sunday of Lent

FPC Uvalde
03/21/2010

The lectionary assignment moves us to John today and locates us six days before Passover; the six days before Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, and Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday, which we will celebrate next week, when Jesus took his first official steps toward the cross.

The story takes place in Bethany, at the home of Martha and Mary, and their brother Lazarus; friends of Jesus. To understand the guest list a little better at this dinner party though, let's back up a bit to what has just happened in this gospel.

It had only been days before, that Jesus had worked a miracle in this family. Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. He had been dead for 4 days in the tomb when Mary and Martha called upon their friend Jesus to come quickly. Jesus called out and brought Lazarus back to life from the dead—and we have our first smell I would like you to imagine. Can you imagine the stench—the strong smell of death after being dead for 4 days?

The gospel writer John loved to write using dualities—light and dark, open and closed, first and last, and so on. I'm thinking he is presenting us with another duality in this passage. As we are remembering the *strong* stench of death from the tomb of Lazarus, we can almost pick up the *faint* smell of Jesus' impending death, can't we?

We can sense of faint smell of death, because, in Jesus' act of resurrecting his friend Lazarus, he is more or less signing his own death warrant. "By raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus has graduated from the category of 'manageable nuisance' to 'serious threat'"¹ to the religious authorities. That pleasing aroma of life and reunion these friends may be experiencing after Lazarus was brought back to life, may also have that distinct odor of threat and rebellion to others. What smelled like new life to Martha and Mary was smelling like danger to the religious elite.

That is the background for our passage today. Jesus is back in Bethany, and his days are numbered, and Jesus knows it. His guests can see it on his face, and they take him in and they care for him.

So picture this scene in your mind's eye, and try to use all your senses when picturing this setting. Lazarus and Jesus and a couple of the disciples—Judas we know of for sure—were lounged around a low table, sitting on the floor, laying back against cushions—almost reclining, really. They were sharing the day's stories; no doubt Lazarus was talking about how good it is to be alive!

Martha is probably in the kitchen roasting some meat and if you really use your imagination, you can almost smell all the smells in the room. You can not only hear the fat dripping down and sizzling on the open fire from the kitchen, but you can smell its aroma. Fresh bread was baked that morning and still lingers in the air. The smell of the recently poured wine on the table is strong and sweet. And maybe the faint smell of death still lingers on Lazarus with hints of myrrh on his body and small twigs of clove still being found in his hair.

¹ The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Prophet Mary," *Bread of Angels*, (Boston: Cowley Press, 1997), 61.

Nobody really even notices Mary is gone, until she comes back in and sits at Jesus' feet. This wasn't really that unusual—Martha could often find Mary gazing off into Jesus' eyes while she could use help in the kitchen.

Well, the guests *did* notice Mary when she suddenly breaks the neck off the clay jar she is has carried into the room and begins pouring an ointment on Jesus' feet. Spikenard—a very expensive oil, and she had an amount that would equal about a year's wages, if it were to be bought.

Suddenly, this smell completely envelops the room—This smell, a sharp scent, somewhere between mint and ginseng begins to overpower all the other scents in the room. It wasn't just the scent of the oil that was getting everyone's attention. Before pouring the oil out, "as everyone in the room watches her, she does four remarkable things in a row.

First she loosens her hair, which an honorable woman never does. Then she pours perfume on Jesus' feet, which is also not done. The head, maybe—people do that to kings—but not to feet. Then she touches him—a single woman rubbing a single man's feet—also not done, not even among friends. Then she wipes the perfume off with her hair—totally inexplicable—the bizarre end to an all around bizarre act."²

Well, Judas is the first to react and respond to Mary's actions. As one who was always thinking about the money, he blurts out his exasperation: "How could she waste a whole year's salary on this perfume when we could've used it to help the poor?" But Jesus stopped him in his tracks. "Let her alone," he said, "She has brought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." The poor you will always have with you, but me, you will not."

Of course Jesus is not giving an excuse to never help the poor—that would go against everything he had every taught. He was bringing home the point that *HE* would not always be with them as the poor would. We should always care for the poor, but their time to care for *him* was limited.

"Mary had prepared him with the fragrant smell of vulnerable love and devotion in anticipation of death, which would soon cover Jesus with its own breathtaking scent."³

Jesus knew exactly what Mary was doing. Mary was loving him with everything she had. What's a year's wages compared to the cost of a life? What's a year's wages, poured out in adoration for one you love when you have been given life in all its fullness? I can tell honestly tell you that a year's wages for the cost of a life is absolutely nothing. Sometimes, we have to let go of what we *think* is most precious to us in life to save a life.

Mary knew something about what was to be saved and what wasn't. Just like the bottle of costly perfume, Christ's life was not *meant* to be saved. His life would be offered up and poured out in love, just like Mary lovingly poured out the perfume.

This smell that enveloped the house in Bethany that day was the smell of love—extravagant, selfless love. Maybe it was the smell of God. We know that God is love, so it makes sense (pun not intended) that this smell could be God. What *does* God smell like? Have you ever thought that question before? Do you think God smells like fresh baked bread or the sweet perfume of a rose? Maybe God smells like a pound of fresh ground coffee beans or a jar of precious spikenard.

² Ibid.

³ Shannon Johnson Kershner, *Preaching the Lesson. The Fifth Sunday of Lent*. March 21, 2010.

Or maybe God smells like the Valdez family who stopped by the church office on Wednesday. Mr. and Mrs. Valdez came by around 11 o'clock on Wednesday saying they were on their way back home to Laredo from Dallas and had run out of money and were hungry. It wasn't just Mr. and Mrs. Valdez, though—they had five children and Paloma—their dog, too. Our church and the Methodist Church helped them out a bit, and I invited them to be our guests that day at the Lenten service and for lunch at noon.

I didn't really expect to see the Valdez family back at worship, as so many times I invite those we have given help to to come worship with us, and rarely, if ever have I seen any return. It was different on Wednesday, though.

It was such an interesting Wednesday for me. I had spent the morning working on this sermon and thinking of all the different ways I could describe the smell of God as I thought about Mary pouring this expensive, very fragrant ointment on Jesus' feet. To be quite honest, I had sprayed Lysol and air freshener a couple of times trying to get the malodorous smell from the recent guests out of my office—all the while not really putting two and two together as I was busily typing out words for my sermon.

When it was getting close to the time for the worship service to begin, I wandered over to hand out bulletins and say hello to folks whose faces are now becoming familiar. With my back to the glass doors leading out to the parking lot, I got a whiff of something. It was not a very pleasant whiff, I might add, and I asked myself, "*What* is that smell?"—quickly forgetting the smell I was trying to cover up in my office.

As I turned to find out, I spotted the Valdez family signing our guestbook in the narthex. They had come back for worship; Mr. and Mrs., all five children and Paloma, the Chihuahua were back! They sat in the next to the last pew, there on the other side, and filled the whole pew—dog and all. As I slipped into the sanctuary at the last minute after passing out bulletins and waiting for the last worshippers to arrive, the only free pew left was the one directly behind the Valdez's. I sat down. Soon Augusta came and sat with me.

As worship progressed, I watched Mr. Valdez and how intently he was listening to the preacher that day. I heard him proclaim a couple of "Amen!" and "Praise the Lords!" with enthusiasm. Their smell lingered on.

As I made my way back to my study after lunch, I couldn't get the Valdez family—or their smell out of my head. You know what I finally concluded? I think that smell that wouldn't leave me **must** be the smell of God, too. I don't know why, and it doesn't seem to make any sense that God would have an *unpleasant* smell, but I just feel it so deeply in my heart that I was smelling God when the Valdez family's scent permeated my office and the back pew and my nose.

What I do know that I have figured out from that experience with the Valdez family is that God is not always who we think God to be. God does not always smell like spikenard or roses. Matthew 25:40 says, "And the King will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'"

Whether you are passing through Bethany on the road to Jerusalem, or passing through Uvalde on your way to Laredo, God pops up in the most bizarre ways. I think Judas and Jesus would've both been pleased with us here on Wednesday as we welcomed the

stranger in our midst. We helped the poor as Judas *claimed* we ought to be doing and we honored God by acknowledging Christ in our midst through the presence of another.

As we get closer to Holy Week and the joyous celebration of Easter in the coming days, pay attention to something you might not usually pay attention to. Give your nose a workout and see where *you* can smell God this week in your comings and goings—you might just be surprised!

Let us pray:

Merciful God, as we move closer and closer to the day of your death and resurrection, may we also move closer to you. Open all our senses to experience you in new ways. Help us to share our love in extravagant ways with others. Amen.