

Grace Lutheran Church
40 N. Main St., Hatfield, PA 19440
April 3, 2022 + Fifth Sunday in Lent
John 12:1-8 Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

All my life I've known that certain smells, or fragrances, can suddenly call to mind a specific memory in a way that no other sense can. I say all my life because since I was very young I would occasionally catch a whiff of a certain scent that catapulted me back to my earliest childhood memory, when I was perhaps 1 1/2, or 2 at the oldest.

This smell was a certain mustiness, not unpleasant, perhaps mixed with wicker or wood or grass. Just a whiff of whatever it was would immediately transport me to a particular moment in time in the life of my two-year-old self. I was standing next to a playpen in a darkened living room of the little house in which my parents first lived after they were married. The room was darkened because the shades were pulled to cool the house from the hot California sun. The room was small and the furniture close. The arm of the sofa was the same height as my head. The feeling I had standing there was one of well-being, of peace, of contentment. For many years this particular scent would not just remind me of that moment--for that instant of recall, I was actually inside my two-year-old body. At some point in early adulthood the memory faded and I have not had that experience since. But I still recall how real it was--not just something I was remembering, but I was actually present, looking out at the scene through my two year old eyes. And all because of a fragrance.

I am pretty sure you all [and those watching at home} have had similar associations of smell and memory. Would anyone like to share one of these? [Those watching at home, would you like to share those with us in the comments?]

There is a good physiological reason that scent and remembered experience are closely linked. Odors are received by the olfactory bulb at the front of the brain, right above the nasal cavity, and from there take a direct route to the limbic system. The limbic system is also known as the emotional brain, which includes the amygdala and the hippocampus, the regions related to emotion and memory. Unlike other senses such as sight or touch, olfactory information bypasses the conscious mind. Smell is therefore the only sensory perception that is not filtered by our consciousness and is processed in the unconscious. This is why certain aromas such as lavender can affect our mood in mysterious ways.

Psychologists have long recognized that smell and emotion intertwine and can be saved in the brain's software for years. Scents that soothed children can continue to alleviate stress and anxiety for the entirety of adulthood. Scents that triggered anger and sadness can continue to result in negative emotions for years to come.

Why are we going into such detail about all this? Because *the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume* at a defining, hair-raising moment for Jesus' ministry and those who loved him.

The context is a dinner party that took place shortly after Jesus had called Mary and Martha's dead brother Lazarus to come out from the tomb in which he had been buried. In Jesus' orbit, that call, "Lazarus, come out!" was like a shot heard 'round the world. From that moment on the Pharisees knew they had to find a way to arrest and kill Jesus -- he was far too great a threat to their own power structure and to that of the Roman Empire, whose bidding they were all too happy to oblige.

A few days later, Martha throws this big party for Lazarus. He reclines at the table as the guest of honor. The house is almost certainly packed with guests, all friends and followers of Jesus.

Then in comes the dreamy Mary. Right in front of everyone she performs this breathtaking act of intimacy and extravagance. She does not merely open a bottle of expensive perfume and dab Jesus' feet; she cradles in her hands an extraordinary amount -- a whole pound, equivalent in value to an entire year of a laborer's wages. She then bows low, her long hair tumbling to the ground, and uses that to wipe the entire pound of perfume across Jesus' feet.

Conversation suddenly stops mid-sentence as everyone holds their breath for long seconds during this unbelievable display of love and devotion. When Judas finally breaks the silence to object to this extravagant waste, Jesus gently replies, "Leave her alone. She has kept this perfume in preparation for the day of my burial." (There is nothing in the original Greek, by the way, about Mary having bought the perfume; clearly she already had it in her possession.)

What Mary is actually doing is beginning the anointing of Jesus' body ahead of time--before his death. Of course the anointing of a body with herbs, spices and fragrances in preparation for burial was a common practice to offset the odors of decomposition. Mary's incredible act, with Jesus' blessing, was to invite everyone present, with Jesus' blessing, into the sequence of events that that would lead to Golgotha exactly one week later where Jesus drew his last gasping breath before soldiers cast lots for his clothing.

Now don't you think that this extraordinary scene had to have been seared into the hippocampi of everyone present by means of the fragrance that suffused the entire house? From that point on, everyone there would associate any whiff of this fragrance with the moment in which Mary began to prepare Jesus' body for his burial one week before he was crucified. This was the moment when they realized Jesus was going to die. This was the moment when they suddenly got a glimpse into who he really was--not just the son of Joseph but the Son of God, the Savior of the world, truly the Messiah for whom they had been waiting so long.

And don't you think they told this exact story to whoever would listen whenever they got a whiff of this same fragrance?

Words are powerful tools, but this is the gospel being spread in a way that is beyond words. How in our lives do we experience the truth of God, the truth of who Christ is, in ways that are also beyond words? What experiences of grace have you had, what encounters with the living Christ, that exceeded the powers of your conscious mind to explain? And how do those encounters come to define you and your belief about who Jesus is?

Just as with the stories of our fragrance memories, I want to find ways to help us share these experiences of grace with each other. The hearing of stories is crucial to our faith. I myself first came to faith not because of my own experience but because people who I loved and trusted told me about Jesus Christ and the power of God's grace. When we share our stories, we encourage others to do the same. Really, aren't we just bursting to tell them to each other?

My prayer for Grace at this point in our lives together is that we can find new ways to do this-- in small groups, in Bible studies, in special times of fellowship. Take Mary's extravagance as your cue. Be bold with the gifts God has given you. Share them openly and liberally. Indulge, if you will, in extravagant waste. It could be that you have been saving these treasures up, as Mary did, for just such a time as this.

Amen.