

The Sweet Smell of Salvation
Rev. Frank Allen
First Presbyterian Church, Kissimmee, Florida

March 13, 2016

RESURRECTION REJECTION

Today is the fifth Sunday in Lent.
Next week will be Palm Sunday, and the week after that will be Holy Week.

We are coming close to the final act in the passion of the Christ.
And our lesson for today reflects that fact.

In the 11th chapter of John's gospel, the chapter that precedes our lesson for today, Jesus does the greatest miracle of his ministry.

He raises his friend Lazarus from the dead.

Now raising the dead is always a pretty good miracle. But, the thing that makes this miracle really special is that Lazarus has been dead four days. And everyone knew it.

The stone had been rolled across the tomb and the tomb had been sealed.

This was no near death experience.
This was the real thing.
The smell of death should have been overwhelming.

In fact they warn Jesus about this when he wants to roll the stone away.

But, Jesus tells his friends to roll the stone away.
And He cries, "Lazarus, come out."

And Lazarus comes out.
He looks ever so much like a mummy.

Yet, when they take off the grave clothes,
Lazarus is alive.

That miracle changes everything.

Many believed in Jesus.
The crowds got bigger after this.

But, some told the religious leaders what had happened. And their response was not belief.
Their response was fear.

They said, "What are we going to do with this man?
If he keeps on performing miracles like this, the people are going to think that he is the Messiah. They will try to anoint him king.

The Romans won't stand for it.
They will destroy us, and our nation as well."

And so the religious leaders decided that, for the sake of the country, Jesus must die.
Better that one man die so that their nation won't be destroyed.

Odd.

Jesus raises the dead and the response of the religious leaders is to have Jesus killed.

The power of God's grace in Jesus Christ overcomes the stench of death, and the religious leaders want to resurrect that smell.

Jesus knew what they were planning to do.
The Bible tells us that for a while he retreated into the desert with his disciples.

And as people prepared for the Passover, they wondered out loud,

"Will Jesus come to Jerusalem for the Passover this year? Does he know that the religious leaders want to arrest him?

Surely he knows better than to show his face here."

Today's lesson gives us the answer to that question.
Six days before the Passover, Jesus and his disciples are no longer in the desert.

They are in Bethany, about two miles east of Jerusalem. Despite threats from the powers that be, they will celebrate Passover in Jerusalem this year.

And so the final chapter of the story begins.

We read in John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³ Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" ⁶ (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

THE SWEET SMELL OF SALVATION

Words go to the thinking part of the brain.
Smells go to the emotional part of the brain.

Catch a whiff of grandma's perfume and all of sudden grandma is present ... if only for a moment. Smells can trigger a powerful emotional response.

After a rainstorm, go outside and take a deep breath. It smells different and it feels different after the air is cleansed.

Spring is on the way.
Take a deep breath.
You can smell it.

Some Christian denominations use incense as a part of their worship service.

The smell creates an air of mystery.
It enables emotions to play a role in the worship service.

Smells can often trigger something deep inside us.

Today's lesson highlights that sense of smell.
I've called it, "The Sweet Smell of Salvation".

DINNER AT BETHANY

As we said, the story begins in Bethany, just two miles east of Jerusalem

And guess who's coming to dinner?
Not only Jesus, but also Lazarus whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

In fact, the meal is served at Lazarus' home.
And Lazarus' sisters, Martha and Mary, are also there.

Many of you remember that other story about Martha and Mary in the Bible.

Martha scurries around trying to serve her guests and Mary camps out at Jesus' feet.
Martha didn't like that much and complained to Jesus about it.

Well, it appears that nothing has changed in that regard. Martha is still busy serving.
And Mary is still at Jesus' feet.

But, then the story takes a different turn.

Mary anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfume.
(I wonder if it might have been the perfume they had bought to use on Lazarus ... had he stayed dead? In those days, you know, they tried to overcome the smell of death with strong perfumes.)

Can't prove that one way or the other.

But what we do know is that this perfume was very expensive. Some believe it might have been worth \$10,000 in today's money.

And that perfume had a penetrating odor.
It's aroma floated throughout the whole house.

The Bible tells us that Mary did something else besides anointing Jesus feet.

She let down her hair and wiped his feet with her hair.

It was shocking that she would use this expensive perfume in this way.

And it was also shocking that she would touch Jesus in this way.

At the last Supper Jesus washed his disciples' feet as a sign of the kingdom that would come.

Love in that kingdom would be marked by service.

It was a shocking thing for Jesus to do.

No Master washes the feet of his disciples.
But, Jesus did.

And I wonder if the disciples thought about this earlier anointing as Jesus washed their feet.

There must have been a sense of foreboding and awe.

JUDAS

But, there was one who was not impressed with this action. It was the one who would betray Jesus to his enemies.

Judas said,

"This was a total waste.

This expensive perfume could have been sold, and the money could have been given to the poor."

A demonstration at a stewardship seminar sparked quite a furor. Pastors were gathered to discuss how to promote generosity.

One presenter spoke about offering a gift directly to God. And the clergy began to yawn.

(Been there. Done that.)

But, what happened next woke them up in a big way.

The presenter pulled out a \$100 bill, put it in an ashtray, and then lit it up.

He prayed,

“Lord, I offer this gift to you and to you alone.”

The atmosphere was electric.

The clergy began to fidget in their chairs as the greenback went up in smoke like incense.

One whispered that it was illegal to burn currency.

Another whispered, “If he’s giving money away, perhaps he has a few more.”

More nervous laughter.

And at that point the speaker said,

“Don’t you understand?

I am offering it to God,

and that means that it is going to cease to be useful for the rest of us.”

We might talk about having money to burn, but it’s been my experience that people who have money never burn it.

They’ve worked too hard for it.

And in fact many people are always trying to figure out a way to get even more money.

\$10,000 worth of perfume used at once was quite an extravagant demonstration.

It certainly shocked Judas (and probably everyone else who was there that day.)

But, I must say that I have become very cynical about those who play upon our sympathies when it comes to our money.

Judas tells us, "Give the money to the poor".
And then you learn that 80 percent of your favorite charity goes to administrative costs.

The TV is filled with ads designed to loosen our purse strings while tugging at our heartstrings.

Give money to the humane society so those poor trembling puppies can find a home.
Give money to the Wounded Warriors organization so that their leaders can throw a lavish party.

There is reason to be careful when it comes to money.

How much really goes to help?
And how much goes to line the pockets of unscrupulous people.

The narrator of our story gives us some insight about Judas' real motive. He said that Judas was the treasurer for the disciples. He kept the common purse.

But, they put the wrong person in charge of the purse. In addition to being a traitor, Judas was also a thief.

He used to steal what was put in into that common purse. And as we'll soon find out, when money is your god, you'll sell your soul for a few pieces of silver.

Don't trust the person who is in love with money.

THE ANOINTING OF LOVE

Instead, trust the person who gives everything out of love.

A session member in the church I served in North Carolina was a very generous giver.

One night the session was arguing about whether our benevolence money was being used wisely by the denomination.

And he said,
“I give my money to the Lord.
I don’t worry about it after that.”

That’s what Mary did.
She gave everything to the Lord out of love.

Jesus told Judas,

“Leave her alone.
She has anointed me for my burial.
You have the poor with you always.
You will not have me with you always.”

Now, this does not mean we shouldn’t give money to the poor.

Indeed, the Bible tells us that we experience the presence of God through our solidarity with the poor. In fact, if Mary was extravagant in her anointing of Jesus, then maybe that means we should be extravagant in our gifts to the poor.

But, this particular gift was special.
It marked a powerful turning point in the drama of salvation.

When kings were chosen, their heads were anointed with precious oil.

For example, when the prophet Samuel anointed David king (even before King Saul was dead by the way), he anointed his head with oil.

Maybe there would have been no complaints had Mary anointed Jesus’ head.
The disciples and the crowd had been trying to get him to be their King for a long time.

But, Mary does not anoint Jesus’ head.
She anoints his feet.

Judas saw that as a waste.
Jesus saw it as preparation.

According to Jesus, she anointed him for his burial.
Her action was prophetic.

The power of God in Christ will not come through the anointing of a king.

The power of God in Christ will come through the death of a Savior.

And so not his head but his feet are anointed.

THE SMELL OF HOLY WEEK

And the smell of that sweet perfume travels throughout the whole house.

I wonder how long the smell of that perfume lasted?
It certainly stayed with Mary for a long time.
After all, she wiped Jesus' feet with her hair.

Wherever Mary went that fragrance was sure to go.
This extravagant blessing given to Jesus ended up being shared with with others.

The fragrance reminded Mary of her love for Jesus, and his love for her.

The smell reminded her that even the stench of death was not too strong for her Master.
Her brother, Lazarus, now lived because of what Jesus had done.

Wherever she walked the people caught the sweet smell of salvation.

And in Matthew's gospel we are reminded that wherever the gospel is preached, Mary's gift will still be remembered.

Our lesson for today tells us that this anointing happened six days before the Passover.
Think about that.

It's possible, even likely that everywhere Jesus went this strong aroma went with him as well.

When he rode triumphantly into Jerusalem,
the aroma went with him and added to the sense of joy and hope.

When he gathered with his disciples in the Upper Room, the aroma went with him and they remembered not only the Last Supper but also this rich aroma that filled the whole house in Bethany.

When he was abused by the religious and political leaders, there was still the sweet smell of devotion.

Mary's perfume still lingered as a sign of her love
... even as Jesus was killed by the very ones he loved and had come to save.

And so, even as Jesus forgave those who crucified him and proclaimed that it was finished on the cross ... maybe even then ... this unforgettable smell of expensive perfume floated through the crowd.

It seemed so out of place.
The stench of violence and death was so strong.
The place of crucifixion was the city dump after all.

But, it was still there. Nothing could stop it.

THE SMELL OF SALVATION TODAY

And it's here today. Can you smell it?

It's the sweet smell of salvation.
It's pure love that penetrates everything.

It is indeed an expensive aroma.
It cost our Savior his life.

But, not even the stench of death is strong enough to cover it up.

We are in Bethany now, just a stone's throw from Jerusalem. And soon we will follow Jesus into the holy city, along with a host of cheering crowds.

But, now the word is out.
Jesus is not hiding.

He is in Bethany preparing to enter Jerusalem for the Passover.

And he's not alone.
He's with Lazarus, the one he raised from the dead.

The people flock to see Jesus there.
But they want to see more than Jesus.
They also want to see Lazarus.

And as they enter the home they are taken back by what they see and what they hear and what they smell.

Lazarus is alive, and the movement grows.
And so does the threat to the religious and political leaders.

The Bible tells us that the "powers that be" are making their plans in the dark corners of Jerusalem

Not only will they have to kill Jesus; they will have to kill Lazarus as well.
Too many people were joining Jesus on account of this great miracle.
(John 12:9-11)

And these leaders wonder,
"How many more will have to die before we feel 'safe?'"

What else will we have to sacrifice in order to keep the money and the influence that we love so much?"

Those questions are still asked even today.
But, in this world filled with violence and anger, the sweet smell of salvation persists.

The world still does its worst.
God in Christ still does His best.

No amount of money can cover up the smell of death.
But, extravagant, wasteful love can overcome even that stench.

When you first sniff it, the perfume of salvation seems like such a faint and delicate odor.
But, before you know it, the aroma fills the whole house.

It's intoxicating.

It covers our sins.
It lifts our hearts.
It opens our minds to a hope that is eternal.

This week take time to breath deeply.

Holy Week is coming.
And salvation is in the air.

AMEN.