

There's a Fragrance in This Place

John 12:1-8

March 21, 2010

When Dorothy and I were seniors in college we took a trip with friends from ONU and their spouses – the other two couples were married prior to their junior year and Dorothy and I prior to our senior year. We collected pop bottles – paid for one tank of gas with what we raised. We sold hotdogs in the dorm until the dean of students got wind of it and wouldn't allow us to do it anymore.

Six college seniors – three sort of adult couples on a week's vacation together to celebrate the years we had spent together and our friendship. We have numerous memories of that trip, but the one that came to my mind as I prepared for this Sunday's sermon happened the second day of our trip as we prepared to pass through the first toll booth for the Florida Turnpike in central Florida.

Mike, our friend from Florida who was relishing his role as tour guide for his northern friends, stopped the car and ordered us all out. His request seemed a bit strange, but out of the car we stumbled and it didn't take long for our senses to connect with the beautiful scent of the orange blossoms. Just thinking of the smell conjures up in my sensory storehouse of memories a wonderful fragrance. To this day it is one of the most pleasant smells I have ever had the pleasure of experiencing.

Are there smells or aromas that bring back memories for you? Another one for me is the smell of chicken frying. I'm not talking about the stuff you get at a fast food restaurant like KFC or Lee's, but the kind that has been hand-dipped in flour and then fried in a skillet on the stove in a home. When mom fried chicken I could smell it from the time I opened the door to my car out in the street on the side of our house. When that smell was in the air there was no stopping to shoot some hoops in the backyard, no stopping in the family room to see the news, no taking my homework up to my room to prepare for doing it later – no, there was only a quick stop in the bathroom to wash my hands and then an offer to do anything to get the meal on the table faster.

Aromas have a way of evoking memories and sometimes feelings that are associated with those memories. The smell of orange blossoms causes me to remember what good friends Mike and Kris, and Larry and Linda were with us – the good times we had together. The smell of home-fried chicken causes me to remember family times around the kitchen table – a day when gathering around the table was more pleasant than it is today.

Six days before the Passover, sometime after Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, Jesus went to Bethany, the hometown of Lazarus and Mary and Martha. A dinner was given in his honor. Some have suggested that the dinner might have originally been planned as a funeral dinner – you know, an opportunity for family and friends to get together and share memories about the one who has died – something our funeral meal ministry team enables to happen often.

Well, the meal obviously could no longer have been a funeral meal since Lazarus was alive. The one who was to be talked about, the dead man, wasn't dead at all but was at the dinner which might explain why members of the family were the ones putting on the meal. They were probably celebrating that the one they loved was still alive. They were probably expressing their thanks to Jesus for his having brought their loved one back to life. And they all did their own thing to make Jesus aware of how grateful they were. Martha was doing what she did so well, rushing around making sure everything was in order, ready for the needs of others to be met – serving. But there was no chastisement from Jesus this time. She was expressing her thanksgiving to and love

of Jesus the best way she knew how – she was ministering with one of her strengths - and Jesus knew it and appreciated it.

And Lazarus, well, he expressed his gratefulness by reclining at the table with Jesus. He spent time with the one to whom he was indebted for his life. He had fellowship with him. He was expressing his thanksgiving to and love of Jesus the best way he knew how at the time and Jesus knew it and appreciated it.

And Mary, well, Mary broke out this expensive perfume and poured it all over Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. The perfume was worth the equivalent of a year's wages for a common laborer in that day – approximately \$12,000 in today's economy. Judas, the one who handled the books for the small band of followers, voiced his concern about the wastefulness. Jesus saw beyond the monetary cost to the expression of love offered by Mary's act. He saw beyond the simple footwashing act and claimed it as a symbolic act of preparation of his body for the death which he was soon to experience.

Mary took a full pound of expensive perfume and dumped it on Jesus' feet – she anointed his feet – and then wiped his feet with her hair. Mary was so filled with gratitude – so wanted to express her love to Jesus – that she ignored the fact that the Pharisees considered Jesus Public Enemy No. 1 and had put out a warrant for his arrest. She ignored the custom of the day that only prostitutes let down their hair in public. She ignored public opinion and what her action might mean to her future position in the community. The fragrance of the perfume and of the food paled in comparison to the fragrance of faith and love Mary, Lazarus, and Martha's actions provided.

I'm sure almost everyone's familiar with the "Make A Wish Foundation." What an awesome organization I think it is. They do some pretty amazing things on behalf of children or teenagers who don't have long to live. When they do something on behalf of someone facing tough times they do it up big – do it up right – do it extravagantly sometimes, the way Mary did. They say to the recipients of their generosity: "We want you to know that you are loved and that you are important."<sup>1</sup>

It's been a number of years ago but there was once a Cincinnati Bible College and they had a really good basketball team one year. They were picked to go all the way. As expected they won the regional tournament. It was on to Missouri for the national tournament. Numerous students went to cheer them on. And, one of the most beloved professors and avid fans of the basketball team, Mr. Smith, also went. He taught a course on the Gospels.

Well, the team made it to the finals but they lost by one point in overtime. The team was devastated – heartbroken – especially the seniors. When the game was over, Mr. Smith went into the locker room. He saw Coach Wallingford and one of the seniors sitting on a bench in front of the lockers crying. Mr. Smith didn't say a word, he just walked over to the two of them and sat down between them, put his arms around them and cried with them.<sup>2</sup>

I think the fragrance of his extravagant act of compassion lived longer in the minds and hearts of those men than anything he ever said in one of his classes explaining the Gospels.

Rev. John Vannorsdall tells of when he served his first congregation. It was a country church and many of the parishioners had gardens. A member once asked him if he would like some carrots? John answered that a few would be nice. The next day there was a bushel of carrots on his front porch. John remembers wondering, "A bushel of carrots for two people? Are they crazy?"

Reflecting on what the family was thinking instead of reacting John soon realized that they weren't crazy, just really grateful to God and happy and providing a bushel of carrots for the pastor was an exuberant way to return thanks. And John noted, "We ate what we could."<sup>3</sup> And the fragrance of his parishioners extravagant act of gratitude forever comforts Rev. Vannorsdall I'm sure.

Another preacher tells of a time before he entering the ministry when he taught school in Camden, South Carolina. The class was for educable mentally-handicapped children and many of the students were poor. One of the little girls in the class was named Natasha and she brought this former teacher a Christmas present. She was plump and shy – hardly ever spoke.

After the bell rang for the bus on the last day before vacation, she went up to the teacher's desk and she handed him a present. It was a very nice present that there was no question cost more than her family could afford. The teacher didn't need the gift and was pretty sure her parents could use the money. But, there Natasha was standing in front of him so proud. Again, this teacher was wise enough to know that the gift was because her family was grateful for the interest he had shown their daughter. They didn't need to buy him a gift, but they were so grateful. He said, "What could I do but hug that little girl and say, "Thanks"?<sup>4</sup> Can you smell the fragrance of the extravagant gift that the girl's family just had to offer?

You see, the fragrances of faith in this story from Jesus' life are not just the aromas created by the food or perfume but the fragrances of faith are the deeds performed as well. Martha's serving and Lazarus' fellowshipping were just as much fragrant acts of worship as Mary's act of providing physical comfort. The question for us to ponder this morning is how do we express our love of Jesus? We can't anoint him with expensive perfume or by letting our hair down and wiping his feet as Mary did.

You know I think there are a lot of ministries around here creating some wonderfully fragrant smells in this place and beyond. I've been hearing recently about a new ministry team forming to assist Nationwide Children's Hospital in their work with children who have been abused or have been removed suddenly from their homes. They are hoping to provide new stuffed animals and books to the hospital so that they can in turn give them to the children when they are brought to the hospital for assessment and treatment if needed. There will be something in the April Maple Leaf in preparation for their kicking off their ministry with a potluck luncheon on May 16. Do you smell that wonderful fragrance that accompanies extravagant serving?

I believe April is the next month some of you will be helping prepare and serve the Sunday morning breakfast at the Community Resource Center. You choose to be worshipping that day by serving food and eating with the less fortunate. What a wonderful smell your labor of love leaves in that place and in this place as well.

Some of you went with your pets to Wesley Glen yesterday. Sometime in the past few years you and your pets went through a training program here at Maple Grove. Dog smells in a church some might ask? Yes, what a wonderful smell it is.

And people are preparing to plant a community garden in the yard to the west of the church so that those in need might have fresh food to put on their table. And people prepare sandwiches and fill brown bags with beanie-weenies and fruit cups so that the homeless might have something to eat. The smell of peanut-butter between two pieces of bread leaves a wonderful smell in our church kitchen refrigerator.

And then there are our young people and their leaders who are preparing to go to Mexico this summer and those who are preparing to be among the Cherokee people in North Carolina.

Yes, indeed, there are some wonderful fragrances in this place. These aren't the only ones – they aren't more important than any of the others – they're just the ones that I chose to lift up today to stimulate our thinking and help us understand that there's a time and a place for us to be extravagant with what God has entrusted to us for the good of others and the spreading of the Gospel. Let us pray.

1. Mark Trotter, "When to Be Extravagant," Collected Sermons (ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 2007), 0-000-0444.
2. [www.sermons.com](http://www.sermons.com) (adapted) as quoted by Billy D. Strayhorn, "Wednesday: The Way of the Cross: Oooh, That Smell," From the Pulpit (Lima: CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 2007), 0-000-5686.
3. Frank G. Honeycutt, "Costly Extravagance," Sermons on the Gospel Reading, Cycle C (Lima: CSS Publishing, 2003), 0-7880-1968-6c as quoted in John W. Vannorsdall, "Elephant Blessings and Other Extravagance," The Lutheran (January 4, 1989), p. 18.
4. Ibid., "Costly Extravagance."