

Lent 5C March 21, 2010
John 12:1-11
Phil 3:4-14
Pastor Tim Koester

What Does Jesus Smell Like?

I love popcorn. It has been one of my favorite foods since I was a boy. My grandfather always made a batch in his cool electric popper whenever I came to his house and he always had a big bag of it waiting for me after every baseball game for the ride back home. There was always a jar of "Orville Redenbacher" in the back of his fridge, maintaining just the right temperature and moisture for ideal popping.

My dad was also a popcorn lover but instead of supporting Orville, he planted his own varieties, which we harvested by hand, put into gunnysacks, and then hand-shelled throughout the winter. My dad taught me how to make popcorn on the stove, in a pan, and even passed along the secret technique of making kettle corn before kettle corn was cool.

The aroma of those tender kernels, cooked in hot oil, and then covered with butter, filled the whole house and lingered for a long time. That's why popcorn is such a great snack to sell. It advertises itself! It's aroma can fill an entire gym or movie theater and literally shout out, "Buy me! I'm delicious". To this day, the smell of popcorn is one of the most pleasing things I know. Not only does it satisfy my taste buds, but it also comforts me with fatherly (and grandfatherly) love.

Aromas are powerful. Someone has calculated that our sense of smell is 10,000 times more sensitive than our other senses. The nose is directly connected to some of the oldest parts of our brain which means aromas often elicit powerful and surprising emotional reactions. Smells communicate on some of our deepest levels.

There is something smelly going on in today's gospel text but like the aroma of popcorn, the smell is really an advertisement for what's truly important. In the gospel of John, Jesus has just brought his friend Lazarus back to life after four smelly days in the tomb. The stench of death was fresh in the memories of everyone in the room.

But six days before the Passover, six days before celebrating the most important saving event in Jewish history, Mary dares to fill the air with a new aroma. She dares to risk her reputation and her resources to let everyone know that the stench of death is about to be overwhelmed with the audacious fragrance of life and in the process, she becomes the first prophet to announce the triumph of Jesus over the forces of darkness and the stink of death.

Mary's perfume fills the whole house and likely spills out into the every street in the village. It is an announcement, and advertisement, that God is once again about to do a new thing. The boldness of Mary costs her. It took a whole year's worth of wages to buy this perfume. But her extravagance also brought accusations of wastefulness and judgments of her character. Judas does not approve and I am willing to bet that many of us would not either. Mary's actions were impractical, impulsive, and illogical. What possible reason would there be to expend such a valuable resource?

Mary obviously believes otherwise. She has witnessed the power of life over death. She has seen Jesus call her brother from the grave, and she realizes that he is about to undo the power of death forever. Like the prophets of old, who dared to tell people to stop living in the past and start imaging a new and unbelievable future, this prophetess uses bold actions to announce the extravagant love of God for all people. I'm betting that even the religious leaders who were plotting the death of Jesus and Lazarus could not escape the aroma of Mary's message.

The love of God in Jesus Christ is a fragrance even more powerful than popcorn. It totally envelops us with comfort and security, with acceptance and forgiveness. The apostle Paul says that knowing Christ, and the power of his resurrection, surpasses the value of everything else. The good news that God loves us without limits and without boundaries is an aroma so powerful that it even covers the stench of death.

The question for us, I think, is "What does Jesus smell like?" How do we understand the good news of God's love for the world? Is it "self advertising" like the smell of popcorn so that all who see our actions and hear our words will be left sniffing the air, wondering where that pleasant aroma came from? Will the knowledge of God's love for us in Jesus Christ permeate every part of our lives so that everything we do is tainted with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, and self control?

Or will we leave people with a foul smell. Will we belch out the odor of anger, selfishness, judgment or hypocrisy?

You see Mary is not the only one who has the power of aromatherapy. God works through us to fill the whole world with the scent of love. We too are given the opportunity to announce the good news of God. On our own we can never smell as sweet as Jesus but God, who transforms us by the power of grace, creates in us new possibilities of living and airs out the pungent odor of sin with the gentle blowing of the Spirit. May we all go out today smelling like Jesus, telling the whole world about God's amazing love.