

John 12:1-8  
April 3, 2022

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! Amen.

Some aromas have a way of signaling our senses that something is happening. For instance, the smell of fresh cut grass each spring is an indicator a long, hard, frigid winter is done and a new season has begun. Or perhaps it's the smell of a turkey slowly browning in the oven that reveals a Thanksgiving meal will soon be had. In just a couple of weeks from now, this space will be filled with the almost intoxicating fragrance of Easter lilies and the lovely floral spray that will adorn the large wooden cross. It's the smell of resurrection. The smell of hope and promise. The smell of love from the One who gave his life so that we might live.

Many aromas are like a long-anticipated guest finally arriving to our home we have been eager to see. We have missed them and cannot wait to celebrate with them once again. It's like the scent left after the candles are snuffed out following our Wednesday Prayer Around the Cross services, which after two years were finally able to be resumed. That lingering scent in the air, at least for me, carries it with an entirely new meaning this year. Hope we are one step closer to moving beyond what's been missing for two years. Opportunity, to gather yet again and celebrate the joy it is gather yet again side-by-side around the cross of Christ. Or it's the scent of chicken and rice baking following last Sunday's worship that encompasses within it a metaphorical aroma of love, service, and the joy these meals and the fellowship that comes with them will provide to those on the receiving end. Shortly on the horizon the air emanating from our kitchen will carry with it the scent of other food items baking to feed those who enter our space once again on the evening of the fourth Sunday of the month.

Other aromas are an indicator of something less desirable. We would much rather avoid its scent. That of a skunk's spray when one has an unexpected and sudden encounter. When I was an insurance adjuster, there was a scent I dreaded the most. The pungent, overwhelming aroma of walking into a burned-out home or business that carried with it much more than charred timber, melted plastic and scorched steel. It was an aroma of lost dreams, uncertain tomorrows, and tears aplenty. That scent lingered for days afterward in my nostrils and hung in the air around those buildings until demolition finally took place.

*The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*

The story of Jesus' anointing is found in each of the four gospel accounts; however, not one is identical to another. Matthew and Mark, for instance, plot Jesus in the house of Simon the leper where an unnamed woman anoints him. These differences in the telling of biblical accounts can be confusing, even make one question what's true and accurate? Yet, we must remember each author was writing decades following Jesus' death and resurrection. Each

author was writing to a specific context and community. Each author may have recollected the account differently or, like the telephone game, heard a story that had been passed along from person to person over the years.

John is the only author to locate Jesus' anointing in the house of Lazarus and tell us it is his sister Mary who does the anointing. He's also the only one to stress the fact this nard used to anoint Jesus' feet filled the house with the fragrance of the perfume. These unique differences always catch my attention when reading and studying a text. In the words of Arnold Jackson to his brother Willis in the late 70's to mid-80's (has it really been that long), "Watcha talking about John?"

Yet, it makes perfect sense when we stroll back through the pages of this gospel. John is intent on giving the hearer signs. Water into wine. Healing after healing. Feeding the 5,000. Walking on water. And the final of the seven signs? You guessed it, raising Lazarus from the dead at Bethany, two miles from Jerusalem where we know what will soon happen to Jesus. The story of Lazarus, the anointing of Jesus by his sister, the smell of the fragrance that fills the house all point to something. They all signify something has happened and something is about to happen. Not unlike all those aromas in our lives.

Lazarus almost seems an after thought in this passage. He says nothing. All we are told is this dinner is occurring in his home and he is seated at the table with Jesus. Yet, that really is all we need to know. Just a handful of verses earlier Lazarus was dead and upon the stone being removed from his grave, Lazarus' sister Martha, tells Jesus, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." (11:38) Perhaps, that scent of death still lingered in the air that evening. It still filled the nostrils of those present. Yet, just as Lazarus is a sign that he once was dead, but now is alive. A foreshadowing of what is to come for Jesus. That nard or perfume also is a sign. It is an aroma that blows through the house with the scent of new life overcoming that of death. It is a scent of joy for the miracle Jesus has done. It is a scent of abundant thanksgiving for a sister who has just regained her brother. It is a scent of hope. It is a scent that prepares the feast soon to be had around the table with those gathered shoulder to shoulder. It is a scent of service from Mary to her Lord.

Yet, it is also the aroma of what is to come. A prophetic gesture Jesus interprets has been done for the day of his burial. Nards and perfumes were used to prepare the deceased body in that time. It seems Jesus' interpretation casts aside another aroma lurking in the room that night. One of deceit. One of dishonesty. One of envy and thievery. The aroma of wolf lurking in sheep's clothing. The aroma of betrayal that will soon take place as Judas hands Jesus over to the authorities and ultimately his death on a cross.

John's gospel begins from the start reminding Jesus is the Word. He was with God. The Word was God. The Word has come into the world and taking on human flesh. The Word is the life

and light for all people. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1:1-5)

So, it’s no wonder we have this scene in which those aromas almost seep through the words and fill our nostrils. This is earthy, fleshy stuff here. The stench of death is countered with the sweet aroma of life via an oil obtained through a plant. The Son of God has taken on human flesh, which means he will succumb to death and his body will need anointed and prepared for burial. And that body, like Lazarus,’ will escape a tomb filled with its own putrid stench of Jesus’ lifeless body with the aroma of resurrection and the crisp dawn air filled with the aroma of a new day.

This passage set in the town of Bethany perhaps carries with it more significance for our community given the name of our congregation. The initial name of our congregation was The Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church. That name would change to Bethany January 12, 1933. As I read long-time Bethany member and historian Paul Friis’ three volume historical account of *Danish Immigrants to West Branch, Iowa*, I came across note of that name change. He writes, “There is no mention as to how the name Bethany Lutheran Church was selected but the name seems appropriate. One person called it, “Home for the Immigrants.” (p.56-57 Volume One).

The move to America and West Branch was one of new opportunity for these hard-working, faithful saints. It is one where we are told they initially gathered in homes prior to securing a dedicated worship space. One can imagine the smells wafting from a nearby kitchen as a meal was to be had. The aroma of hope for the future. The sweet fragrance of opportunity. Paul also writes that initial group stated, “it was their true wish, in the name of Jesus, to gather together into a congregation with the purpose of remaining in the Saviour’s fold, and to thereby bring others into Jesus’ fold, the decision was made, with intense prayer to our God and Father, and with serious discussion to form a congregation.” (p.56)

While there may not be any mention as to how the name “Bethany” came about, one can’t help but hear in those initial reports, gatherings, and vision a glimpse of what took place in Bethany centuries earlier as a group of Jesus’ followers gathered for a meal surrounded by the aroma of new life. Hope for a renewed fellowship with a sheep, Lazarus, lost to death but restored to life by his Shepherd. Fellowship around the table, together and with Jesus, paramount to their life together. Abundant thanksgiving to Jesus for the work he had done celebrated.

That word “fragrance” used by John shows up two other spots in the New Testament. In the second chapter of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians we read, “<sup>14</sup> But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. <sup>15</sup> For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; “(NRSV)

Those first Danish immigrants spread the fragrance that came with knowing Jesus. They were the aroma of Christ in the world. When we reflect on the present and look to the future, what fragrance is filling the air? In a world which too often succumbs to the aroma of contempt, bitterness, division, war, jealousy, slander, betrayal, envy, complacency, revenge and the like the gospel of Jesus, the aroma of God's love, Christ' salvation for all, resurrection hope, love for our Lord and for one another as he commanded is the fragrance we were created to put forth in the name of Jesus. Like those who have come before, the fragrance of "gather(ing) together into a congregation with the purpose of remaining in the Saviour's fold, and to thereby bring others into Jesus' fold." The aroma that comes through intense prayer to our God and Father.

Let us go forth, filled with the fragrance of new life that cast aside the scent of death that night in Lazarus' home, in Bethany, and filled it with the scent of new life that comes via way of our Lord's death and resurrection, filled with the scent of bread and wine we will soon feast upon, filled with the fragrance that a new day is upon us, new opportunities abound, and the joy and celebration of so much of what we have lost over the past two years is yet again being found as we more safely once again are able to gather together, be the body of Christ, and through God working in us via the Holy Spirit spread in every place the fragrance that comes through knowing our Lord and staying connected to his fold.