

## Of Scents and Cents

John 12:1-8

Now that some of the worst effects of the Pandemic seem to be receding, one that still lingers with some of those who were infected, is the loss of their sense of smell. Given the worse possible outcomes of COVID, some might say that losing the ability to smell is getting off easy. Recently though, science has suggested that there is more to the sense of smell than once thought. Some research indicates that certain aromas can actually trigger vivid memories from the past. The earthy scent in the air just before a rain shower, the salty tang of an ocean breeze or the rich aroma of a certain home cooked meal can magically unlock the remembrance of long forgotten experiences.

The sense of smell certainly made all the difference on the night when Jesus and his disciples were guests in the home of a man named Lazarus, and his two sisters, Martha and Mary. Lazarus and his sisters lived in Bethany, which was just a short distance from Jerusalem. Jesus and his disciples were headed to Jerusalem in order to celebrate the Passover festival. Next week we'll celebrate Palm Sunday, which is the story of Jesus' joyful entry into Jerusalem for the Passover. But behind the sights and sounds of the crowd's welcome that day, the foul odor of betrayal and death hung heavy in the air. All along their journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jesus had warned his disciples that during the Passover he would be betrayed into the hands of his enemies, who would put him to death. But that on the third day he would rise again. They reacted to each warning with disbelief and denial.

The scent of betrayal and death also filtered through the house of Lazarus, Martha and Mary that night. Yet, amid the happier smells of Martha's home cooking, neither the hosts nor the guests seemed to notice. With the exception, that is, of Jesus. And as it turns out, Mary. Mary alone among them seemed to sense the gravity of the moment. So, she excused herself from the table, then returned holding a jar containing a pound of expensive perfume. Pure nard. Mary knelt down, broke open the jar and poured the contents — every last drop — over Jesus' feet. One of the disciples —Judas Iscariot— was indignant. He criticized this wasteful use of

expensive perfume that could have been sold to help the poor. After all, the perfume was worth 300 denarii. Which was enough to feed a working family for a year!

Judging Mary's action purely according to dollars and cents, it might appear that Judas had a point. Which is why, when John wrote this Gospel, he slipped in a couple of parenthetical comments to give us a glimpse into some things about Judas that could not be perceived through either sight or hearing. Which are that Judas is the disciple who will betray Jesus, and that while Judas talked a good game about helping the poor, behind the scenes he was embezzling from the money that was donated to the poor.

When Mary opens her jar of nard and anoints the feet of Jesus, it says that "the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." And, the fragrance that filled the room was the scent of true discipleship. Because, if discipleship means giving Jesus your all without holding anything back — than Mary was the true disciple. Mary gave the most valuable thing she owned for Jesus, while Judas would soon sell him out for 30 pieces of silver. Mary emptied her jar for Jesus, while Judas was thinking about filling his own pockets at his expense.

Jesus knew which one was which, and so he defended Mary. "Leave her alone," he says. "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." You see, that was one of the ways nard was used in antiquity. To anoint corpses in order to mask the odor of death and decay. But...this day was *not* the day of Jesus' burial. And *nobody* anointed someone for their burial while they were still living.

It may be that what looked to the naked eye to be an impulsive and inappropriate action by Mary, was actually a prophetic moment. It was prophetic in that the aroma associated with a tomb hovering over the dinner table evoked memories of the times Jesus had prophesied about his impending death, but nobody had listened. At the same time, it was a reminder of his prediction that his death would not be the end—but a new beginning. Because, as it turned out, when Jesus' dead body was taken down from the cross it was laid in the tomb without being anointed, because the Sabbath was about to begin. And, when Mary went to the tomb to do the job on the morning after the Sabbath was over, there was no body in the tomb to anoint. Jesus was resurrected. Just as he had tried to tell them he would be.

Both Mary and Judas “prepared” Jesus for burial in their own way— she by “anointing” and he by betrayal. There was something else that Mary did that night which must have raised some eyebrows. She used her hair to wipe his feet dry of the nard she had poured over them. Which means that after this moment, she and Jesus would have shared the same scent.

If you were in that room that night and closed your eyes and blocked your ears, so that you had only your sense of smell to rely on, you would not have been able to tell Jesus and Mary apart. You wouldn’t know which one of them was sitting beside you at the table! In one of his Epistles, the Apostle Paul described what true discipleship means this way: “For we are the aroma of Christ to God.” Which is another way of saying that when our lives are devoted to following Jesus and becoming more and more like him, it’s as though, if God’s eyes and ears were shut, so that all God had to go on was the sense of smell alone, God would not tell the difference between us and Jesus! Not in the sense of us pulling the wool over God’s eyes. Not the way Judas probably thought he was fooling everyone in the room that night, including Jesus. It’s more like the way we acquire the scents of the places we’ve been and the company we’ve kept. Like the way you can tell that someone sitting near you in a darkened theater is a smoker by the odor that is embedded in their clothes. Sometimes, our sense of smell reveals truths that our eyes and ears miss.

Like Mary of Bethany, the closer we get to Jesus and the more we spend time with him in prayer and worship and service to others, the more the scent of him lingers on us. And the more God sees—or, I should say, smells— Jesus on us. So, may the scent of a disciple be the fragrance that surrounds you. And may the sweet smell of discipleship always be the perfume that fills this house of worship.

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