

5 Lent                      John 12:1-8  
Christ and Grace        April 7, 2019  
Robin Teasley

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

Six days before the Passover, at a dinner party where one man is celebrating new life and another is approaching his hour, it seems a strange thing to be focusing on perfume. We know this about the sense of smell though, don't we? Odors evoke our memories more powerfully than almost anything else. We know if something smells good or bad. And we can associate many of our life events with odors that transport us back in time. Most of us are familiar with that "new baby" smell, and who doesn't want to color if we smell a new box of crayons? When we smell turkey and stuffing, we may recall family gatherings from our past. Easter lilies will remind some of the joy of Easter Day, and others of a recent visit to a funeral home. When my son was a toddler, he would dissolve into tears each time I washed his blanket because it no longer "smelled right." Some of us grew up familiar with the scent of incense in church and when we notice it now it brings back memories of worship in other places. Sitting at the bedside of a dying friend I memorized the scent of death. And the perfume of a loved one lingers long after they have left us.

This dinner for Jesus that we hear about today, occurred soon after he had raised Lazarus from the dead. What had been a life-giving event for Lazarus became the turning point in the life of Jesus, the coming of the hour when he would be lifted up on the cross. When Jesus restored Lazarus to life, it created such a disturbance, such excitement, that the chief priests and Pharisees called a meeting of council and from that day on they planned to put Jesus to death. Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, were filled with gratitude for what Jesus had done, so they held a dinner party in his honor. We don't have the guest list but it is likely there were other disciples there as well. We know Judas was there. Being there together as friends, with the delicious aroma of dinner coming from the kitchen, and retelling the stories of all that had happened surrounding Lazarus' illness must have been bittersweet for Jesus, for he knew that he would soon leave them.

Before anyone realized it, Mary disappeared for a few moments and then quietly returned with a pound of costly perfume. She then did something so unbelievably contrary to social customs of the day that it is still remembered, still told in various versions in each of the four gospels. Anointing Jesus' feet with a spice used to anoint the dead, then loosening her hair and wiping his feet with it brought the room to a stunned silence. Women did not let down their hair or touch men in public! And the scent of the nard immediately reminded them of Lazarus and his recent illness and all the fear and sorrow came rushing back into the room. The heavy scent of so much nard was reminding them of death. They knew the authorities were looking for Jesus, and Jesus knew his hour was near. The room was thick with tension, fear, and anxiety because death has a way of creating those emotions. People who are afraid start picking at one another, criticizing one another, counting the cost of everything, losing sight of the big picture, missing the point.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Matthews, link no longer available.

And so Judas speaks up first and it would seem he was justified. After all, Mary had just used a pound of nard, worth about a year's wages, to generously anoint Jesus' feet. That money would have been better spent on the poor. Judas knew that any good disciple would know that. But Mary seems to know something the others don't. She senses something – the fragrance of change – the way you can smell rain coming on a summer afternoon. She is not being wasteful – Mary is being extravagant with her love. Not counting the cost for she knows the price Jesus is about to pay.

She was modeling discipleship, doing intuitively what Jesus would command his disciples to do later that very same week at another meal. Mary prophetically acted out a new commandment before Jesus *said* it, before he *enacted* it when he washed the disciples' feet. Jesus would soon tell his disciples, "Love one another as I have loved you." Mary has already comprehended so much. She knows how precious life is, how every moment must be savored and lived in reckless extravagance – not for herself – but for those she loves. Rather than waiting to anoint Jesus after death, Mary gives witness to the living, breathing presence of Christ. She shows her belief in her actions, showing us what it looks like to live as a disciple.

Are we disciples? Do we serve the *living* Christ or are we only preserving a memory of Jesus? When the greater church, like Judas, becomes more concerned with the details and the rules and prescribed expectations for the behavior of others; choosing to denounce with words rather than showing love by its actions; it is not following Christ's commandment to love the neighbor. When the church catches the scent of change, it can sometimes become anxious, fearful, or uncertain of the future, it can forget the lavish love that has been poured out for us on the cross and begin hiding from the world – missing the point.

Jesus told his disciples to love one another, and he did not make exceptions for those who do not belong to our political party, for those living in third world countries, for those whose skin color is different, or for those whose lifestyles we might not understand. Jesus the Word became flesh and *lived among us* so that we might believe and in believing have life, abundant life in his name. To exclude others is to deny the children of God the opportunity to know God's love. We can choose to be critical and judgmental or we can choose to love one another. Out of that love will flow discipleship in all its forms.

What is the scent of discipleship? What does it smell like? Does that sweet odor permeate Christ and Grace? I think it does. Discipleship smells like feeding the hungry...that unmistakable aroma of a meal being prepared in our kitchen for the people at the Hope Center. It smells like the wonderful Lenten lunches prepared by our ECW to feed our guests and then in turn fund the many outreach ministries they support. It's also the sweet aroma of a few families who are quietly feeding dinner to the homeless at Trinity UMC on Tuesday nights. The scent of discipleship permeates the Petersburg Home for Ladies, where our youth visit with gift bags and smiles, bringing joy to the residents there. When we model discipleship we show the living Christ to everyone around us, from the visitors who walk in this door, to all the people we serve wherever we go. We anoint them with love.

My prayer is that we will all find ways to anoint others with love, whether we are the Marthas in the kitchen preparing food, or the Marys giving without reservation to the children of God who

are in great need, for that is discipleship – giving to others without counting the cost. It is the fragrance, not of death, but of life and love. May this house be filled with the fragrance of the perfume. Amen.