

WD January 24, 2022

“The Scent of Grace”

What is your favorite smell? Is it associated with a person, a food, a memory...why is it your favorite? I can't say that I have a favorite smell. But I do know that when I smell good food cooking it makes me hungry. I know that when I work with cedar it has a very pleasant smell compared to oak. There is a reason most prefer a cedar closet over an oak closet.

Consider how much work we put into covering up our humanity in every corner of our lives. Along with soaps, body washes and shampoos that we clean ourselves with are also the deodorants, perfumes, skin creams, foot products, and so on. What about our clothes? Our laundry detergent and our bounce drier sheets make our clothes, our towels and our bedding all smell good.

When we go out on a date, we do our best not to smell human. You know what that is. B.O., bad breath, sweaty feet, dirty underwear, or week-old clothes. No way. Take a shower. Put on the deodorant, brush the teeth, and pop the breath mints.

Cleanliness is always associated with things that smell good. When we sell a house, we want it to smell like fresh cookies not like a litter box. The fact is if it smells good then we like it. If it doesn't smell good, we avoid it or cast it out.

We don't buy scented candles that smell like a dirty garbage can or like skunks or road kill. Once upon a time when our church in Michigan was picking up garbage along the road, I happened to find a half-full milk carton. I pick that thing up and it blew my hair back. Man, that was a shock. Very bad.

The golden rule in disaster recovery when house has been in a flood and the house has been without power for a long time—do not open the refrigerator. Leave it closed. What's inside that frig is angry. And you won't like it when it is angry. The smell of a refrigerator full of food that has been off for weeks, especially in hot climates, will traumatize you for life.

The sense of smell will draw us close to something or it may repel us from something. And what's interesting is that the same smell may be pleasing to one person but fowl to the next. Just ask anyone who has been pregnant or has gone through cancer treatments. One's sense of smell may become highly sensitive. What smells good to one person may not smell good to another.

So today with noses in mind we turn to 2 Corinthians 2:14-17. Take a listen. **¹⁴ But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. ¹⁵ For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. ¹⁶ To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task? ¹⁷ Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God.**

For a Jewish believer this would immediately bring to mind the Temple sacrifices and burnt offerings which were often described as a “pleasing aroma to the Lord” (Genesis 8:20-21 and Numbers 28:27 for example.) Does the Lord have a nose? Well, he sure fashioned noses and put them on every human being so they must be important. We also note that incense was often used that the Temple and closely associated with the prayers of the people. “Let my prayers rise before you as incense and the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice” (Psalm 141:2). When Zechariah was in the Temple he was burning incense and praying when the Angel appeared to him announcing the birth of John the Baptizer. Incense and smells are often associated with worship. Yesterday, in our Gospel lesson from Luke 7:36-50 there is special mention of the perfume that is poured out on Jesus' feet as she wept at Jesus' feet in repentance and worship.

Here in 2 Corinthians 2:14-17 Paul is mixing an image of Roman triumph with aromas that go with it. Familiar to a Gentile, especially in Rome, a Roman Triumph was a parade often after a Roman victory over an enemy. During such parades captives of war would be marched through the streets as garlands of flowers were carried and incense was burned to the gods. The aromatic perfumes wafted on the air as spectators and those in the procession breathed in their fragrance. At the parade's finale, many prisoners would be put to death. Thus, the aromas were pleasing and life-giving to the victors, but they were the smell of death to those who had been defeated.

In Paul's analogy believers carry the scent of grace. To those who are perishing we carry the scent of death and are naturally repelling to the unbeliever. Knowing Jesus gives us a specific smell of Christ. The Gospel has a specific smell and our knowledge of it has an aroma, a pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved. It is a welcome smell.

The scent of grace is all over everything that is of Jesus. Ephesians 5:1-3 refers to Jesus as the fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. The scent of grace is also in every act of grace that God's people give. Philippians 4:17-19 speaks of gifts given in Jesus as fragrant offerings, sacrifices, pleasing to God just like the sacrifices of the Temple.

It turns out that God likes things that smell good just like we do. Yesterday in our Gospel from Luke 7:36-50 the sinful woman poured perfume on Jesus' feet. The perfume really reflected the repentance of the woman. In John 12 at another anointing, this time by Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anoints Jesus with a nard of perfume. Again, it is a scent associated with faith and worship. On the other hand, Jesus is repelled at things like arrogance and death. Such things repel Jesus and have no place in God's kingdom.

Ever wonder what heaven may smell like? One can only guess. One thing is for sure, it will smell like life, maybe like spring. Lord willing life is what other sense in us.

So, how we smell is important. Smelling good usually means that we are clean and we are trying to put our best foot forward. We have a spiritual smell as well. And the same applies. To be a pleasing aroma in Christ means we are cleansed of our sins in Baptism. We are dressed in Christ's righteousness, robes made clean in the blood of Jesus' cross. And since clothes often carry the scent of the one who has worn them, the clothes of righteousness in every believer has the scent of our Heavenly Father as well. These are after all clothes from heaven. It permeates our souls like smells get into our skin or hair. It lingers on us when we reach out with the Gospel. And our actions are like sacrifices to the Lord that are pleasing aromas because they are offered in faith. We are meant to smell like heaven, like Jesus who gave everything for our salvation. The grace of God has a scent which identifies us as God's people and covers us with the scent of life. Faith in Jesus makes you smell great.

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John 3:30