

“An Aroma of Love”

May the grace and peace of almighty God be with you. Amen.

A few months ago, I hosted a bible study based on Luther’s theological understanding of love. As a part of this study, we explored a carnal hermeneutic of love – that is, the way in which a person might experience love through the sensation of touch, sound, taste, sight, or smell. It was a tremendously fun experience to explore what love tastes, feels, looks, sounds, and smells like. For some, the smell of beautiful flowers was a means of communicating love, but for others, who had allergies and strong sensitivities, that same fragrance had a more negative connotation.

What might be a pleasing fragrance for one person is sometimes considered an unpleasing smell for others. I spent many of my formative years caught in this type of tension.

The majority of my high school career was spent working on a dairy farm. I loved every minute of it. The cold mornings and hot summers, the itch caused from bailing straw and hay, the loud demands of a stubborn cow, and of course, the mixed smell of cattle, iodine, and manure that penetrated through every layer of clothing that I would wear. For those of us who worked on the farm, this mixture was a beautiful smell that represented the hard work and love that we experienced each and every day. To this day, the smell of a farm warms my heart with joy and fills my mind with fond memories. But, for my mother however, that smell is a reminder of 6 years spent battling what she referred to as a “barnyard stench.” She tried everything to mask the smell of my arrival home each night. She even tried spraying me with Febreze as I walked through the door, but it only seemed to amplify the smell. Our home soon became a wide variety of beautiful aromas – but no matter how powerfully strong the fragrances were, you could always catch a whiff of that elegant “barnyard stench.”

This story might sound odd for a Sunday morning, but a very similar experience occurs in today’s gospel text.

It’s six days before the Passover festival and John notes that the chief priests are on the look-out for Jesus. They want to arrest and kill him. Jesus, of course, is at a dinner celebration with his friend Lazarus – The same Lazarus that rose from the dead in the previous chapter of John’s gospel. During this celebration, Mary, a sister to Lazarus, takes an expensive pound of perfume and uses it to anoint Christ’s feet. Judas is outraged by this and notes that the perfume, worth almost a full year’s wages, could have been sold in support of the poor. Although his suggestion seems like it might be a good idea, John reminds readers that Judas is speaking with selfish motives. Judas looked after the disciples’ common purse and often stole from it.

Jesus quickly comes to Mary's defense, tells Judas to leave her alone, and supports the notion that Mary is preparing him for the day of his burial. It was Jewish custom for bodies to be anointed with oil before their burial, but what makes the interaction between Mary and Jesus unique, is the fact that Mary is acting somewhat preemptively by anointing Jesus while he is still alive. This is the turning point in John's narrative and is the moment in which the story shifts to a focus on the impending death and resurrection of Jesus. It is almost as though Mary, unlike many of the disciples, has an understanding of what is about to happen to their beloved Jesus. It seems as though she not only comprehends Christ's imminent death, but had prepared for it in advance by purchasing this extravagantly expensive perfume. But perhaps more shocking is the fact that she humbles herself and breaks societal standards and customs by letting her hair down and then using it to wipe Christ's feet.

And so, like many of my family gatherings, this house becomes filled with layers of tension. Judas is upset at Mary, who Jesus defends, Jesus and Lazarus know that the chief priests want to put both of them to death, and Mary is strangely acting outside of customary expectations by anointing Christ's feet and letting her down to wipe them. But amidst all of this chaos, conflict, and tension, John notes that the house is filled with the fragrance of the expensive perfume. Amidst the stench of death coming from Lazarus, the fearful smell of Christ's impending death, the odor of bitterness and betrayal coming from Judas, and the uncomfortable smell of Mary's seemingly odd but humbling act of worship and acknowledgement, the room is filled with the fragrance of perfume – The room is filled with the beautiful fragrance of love.

Just as my mother's candles and air fresheners made the "barnyard stench" less overpowering and a little more pleasant for her – the fragrance of perfume in today's narrative masks the odors in the room and perhaps makes it a little more comfortable for those attending this dinner. Bitterness, death, fear, injustice, betrayal, and sin remain uncomfortable odors within the house, but they are made a little more bearable by the fragrance of love that emanates through Mary's humbling act of servanthood. And in this tension between pleasant and unpleasant, fragrance and odor, we catch a glimpse of Luther's theology of the cross – a glimpse of the human condition interacting with the gift and message of God's love.

Robert Kolb, an editor of The Book of Concord, notes that Luther's theology of the cross outlines that "in the shadows cast by death, God does indeed meet his straying [and] rebellious human creatures...it is there that God reveals who he is and reveals who they are. [It's] not in [a] light beyond the clouds, but in the dust of the grave. God has come to tell it like it is about himself and about humanity" (adapted from: *Luther on the Theology of the Cross* by Robert Kolb, 2003, parenthesis added). Part of the theology of the cross is that God, through Jesus, is actively at work amidst the humanness of this life. The struggles of this life remain an ever-present reality, but because God is also present amidst our human experience, there is hope, there is healing, and there is peace. There is love, there is comfort, there is a better tomorrow

and a more bearable today. Like those who attended the dinner in John's narrative of the gospel, we, as believers, are caught in the tension between life and death. Because we are human, we will die – but because Christ is God, we will live.

The world is filled with unpleasant realities. Sin has infiltrated hearts and minds. Human bodies grow weak and tired. Death is an inescapable reality. But the gospel message layered amidst today's text is that these pains and sufferings are not the full story. As Paul reminds readers in 1 Corinthians: because of God's love shown in and through the gift of Jesus Christ, death has lost its victory. As Christ dines with his companions, he knows that he will soon be put to death. In these final days of his earthly life, Christ walks amidst the tension of life and death. In the coming weeks, as we commemorate Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday, we will observe and remember this tension. And as we celebrate Christ's resurrection on Easter Sunday, we will again be reminded of the hope of eternal life that is given through God's resurrecting power. God walks with us amidst the discomforts of this life, bringing hope, comfort, and peace for the journey. Christ has already walked the journey of both life and death, making a way for us to both live and die anew.

The hope of today's gospel text is that amidst both the metaphorical and the literal fragrances of this life, Christ walks with us and before us. But that promise also comes with a challenge. Will we follow Christ's example? Will we live with a spirit of humility and grace? Will we stand and exemplify Christ's call for justice, compassion, and love? Will we care for the poor and keep them amidst us rather than shoving them to the fringes of society? Christ is the light that shines amidst the darkness and the uncertainty of this life – will we follow the light of his example and let God be our guide and vision?

My mother could never fully mask the "barnyard stench" that infiltrated our home, but with a spirit of love, she found a way to look beyond the problem – a way to exist amidst the circumstance without being overcome by it. Likewise, Christ provides a sure and certain hope amidst the challenges and struggles of this life. For Christ who lived, died, and was resurrected, walks with us and before us, proclaiming the hope of life eternal, where death will be no more and the beautiful fragrance of God's love will surround us for eternity. Amen.