

The Scent that Lingers

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Year C: Lent 5 John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

The love Mary has preparing Jesus – loving Jesus – into what comes next, is the scent that lingers. Some will think it too extravagant. (Idea from Karoline Lewis: Working Preacher.com)

God's grace and peace to you this day in the name of Jesus our Lord and Savior.
Amen

Aromas can be very powerful! Ever walked near an elderly woman and thought fondly, "She smells like grandma!" Or how about the lingering smell of smoke on your clothes after sitting near a camp fire, or the curry from an Indian restaurant? Even passing by someone who is wearing the same perfume or aftershave from a previous love? One sniff and it takes you back to that embrace or that moment. Our noses have memories.

John writes, "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." Everyone smelled it. How could they not? It was a full pound of aromatic nard! Judas thought it smelled wasteful. The other men in the house thought it had overtones of intimacy not proper for public.

Mary took down her long hair – that alone was suspicious – for hair was an honor not to be damaged. Then to wipe Jesus' feet with her hair – it carried all the negative norms it would today. Eyebrows were raised. "What is going on here?"

Yet Mary recognized the juncture, that moment in time in Jesus' journey. He had just come from raising Lazarus from the dead. That neighborhood still smelled like death. Lazarus' resuscitation got too much attention. The religious authorities were very upset, plotting to stop him from all of His public ministry.

But next Jesus was headed into Jerusalem where the smells of fresh cut palm branches and then bread and wine and then the foul odor of betrayal and finally the scent of His own blood on his face would fill his senses. He knew what was coming. Mary did too.

An anointing of this magnitude could only signal a coronation or burial of a king. Mary wanted people to recognize who Jesus was. Mary knelt, at Jesus' feet, her hair acting like diffusing sticks lifting up the scent of precious oil, lavishly covering every toe, His tired dry heels, indeed Jesus' very soul.

Have you ever been loved like this? Loved into what was coming next? Loved by someone into a future that might be difficult, might be joyous, but you are loved none-the-less?

First day of first grade and Dad asks, "Hey, sweetie? What do you want in your lunch box today?" Come noon time there were chips and a ham sandwich. But to your surprise, there were freshly baked peanut butter cookies. And when you opened the bag, that sweet, unique smell, made your lunch buddy turn and say, "Hey! Can I have one of those?"

Headed off to college – you've gone shopping for all the dorm room supplies. You've had that last supper that only Mom can cook. She and Dad stand in the driveway, trying to hide their tears, smiling bravely at their child that seems so young, yet old enough to be going off into the wide world, with a care package of brownies in the passenger's seat.

Or keeping vigil in that hospice room. She always enjoyed that flowery lotion from Bath and Body. And so her devoted groom, after 57 years of marriage does what he did every night for her. Rubbing that cream into wrinkled ankles; that seems in that moment a salve not only for her, but also for his tired heart. He's kept his vows. He's just loving her into what will come next. "I'll be along soon, dear. Don't worry. Jesus is waiting to welcome you."

These are the scents that linger....the moments in time when we lovingly get pushed into or accompanied into what comes next. Given with a huge heart. Jesus' needed this anointing, for where He was headed.

We like to think of our Lord as invincible. Courageous. Bold. Superhuman due to his divine nature. Yet, perhaps He needed this moment of loving care just as much as Mary needed to give it. The next week of His life would bring accusations. The trial. Peter's claim, "I've never known this man!" The weight of the cross on His shoulders as He was made to carry it up the hill.

In the coming days, would He remember? Would He still be able to remember the lovely scent? The feel of Mary's hair? Her kind eyes looking into His, offering Him strength and reassurance that all would soon be over and the pain was worth it? His love would not be in vain in spite of the people now yelling in His face?

I'd like to think Jesus would remember – just like we do – when we get loved into the next chapter of our lives. Jesus will remember. Perhaps He'll remember His mother too. When she said, 'Now is time for the wine, Son. Now.' The strength of loved ones – Jesus' own loved ones – encouraging Him to step into the future. These are the scents that linger. These are the gifts of love that make a difference into helping us grow into who God calls us to be – and all that God hopes we'll become as we walk in faith.

The groom and his new husband stand side by side, offering thanks for all who've come to the ceremony. There is an aroma of gratitude, of humility, of joy now that covenantal promises have been made. The pile of gifts on the table carries a perfume of affirmation from friends and family saying, "we believe in you and the love you have. You can do this. We're behind you – no matter what life brings."

There might always be one or two nay-sayers in the crowd. "This perfume is too expensive. It should have been sold and the money given to the poor." Sometimes people cannot understand why we buy roses for Valentines' Day that cost \$50 when the next week, the same roses only cost \$15. Maybe the nay-sayers have never experienced this kind of love. Perhaps no one has ever bought them roses.

Mary – the woman – the friend – the disciple – loved her Lord. He didn't need roses. Jesus needed anointing oil.

Can you smell it? Thanks be to God.
Amen.

