

## “Giving Thanks for Each Other”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

April 3, 2022

<sup>1</sup>Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup>There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup>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.

<sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup>“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” <sup>6</sup>(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.)

<sup>7</sup>Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup>You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” (John 12:1-8)

Scientists have determined that, of all the senses, the one that is most deeply connected to memory is the sense of smell. Certainly, we have memories that can be triggered by something seen or tasted, heard or felt. But a familiar smell has a way of conjuring up a distant memory so powerfully that we feel as if we are experiencing that event all over again.<sup>1</sup>

For me, the smell of freshly cut grass, mingled with a whiff of gasoline, brings back memories of mowing lawns in my teenage years, just as the smell of waffle cones always makes me think of sunny days in the park in Blowing Rock, North Carolina, and the Kilwin's Ice Cream store just across the street.

I am sure you have your own scent-induced memories. Maybe the smell of Coppertone suntan lotion transports you back to carefree days spent on the beach. The wet musty smell of a pine forest might remind you of a camping trip long ago, or a turkey cooking in the oven might carry you back to a particular Thanksgiving with grandparents long since gone.

The science suggests that we are actually hard-wired for this kind of recall. When we see, hear, touch, or taste something, that sensory data goes immediately to the thalamus, which serves as our brain's relay switch. The thalamus then sends the message to the right spot in the brain for processing. Smells, however, follow a different track. Our nose sends its signals straight to the olfactory bulb, which not only processes the sensory data, but also serves as on-site storage for long-term memories. In other words, smells can travel right into some important mental closets that we don't open very often, so the memories that tumble out can be among the most vivid that we have.<sup>2</sup>

This science is compelling, but I think the poetry of Diane Ackerman puts it best. “Nothing is more memorable than a smell,” she says. “Smells detonate softly in our memory

---

<sup>1</sup> Claire Gillespie, “This Is Why We Associate Memories So Strongly With Specific Smells,” published October 04, 2021, [www.verywellmind.com](http://www.verywellmind.com), accessed March 31, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Ashley Hamer, “Here's Why Smells Trigger Such Vivid Memories.” August 01, 2019, [www.discovery.com/science](http://www.discovery.com/science), accessed March 31, 2022.



like poignant land mines hidden under the weedy mass of years. Hit a tripwire of smell and memories explode all at once. A complex vision leaps out of the undergrowth.”<sup>3</sup>

I expect this story from John’s gospel became one of those “poignant land mines” in this family’s collective memory. To understand where they are, we have to start with where they had been. Not long before, the brother of Martha and Mary, Lazarus, had become deathly ill. They sent for Jesus in the hope that he might heal their brother, but it took Jesus a while to get there. Lazarus died, was prepared for burial and laid in a tomb. A few days later, Jesus finally arrives to a heartbroken household. He is so deeply moved by Mary and Martha’s grief that he begins to cry. They follow him to the tomb, where he instructs them to roll the stone away and open the tomb.

Martha protests immediately. “Lord,” she says, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.”

But Jesus persisted. “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

So, they rolled away the stone, and Jesus began to pray. And then “he cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ [And] the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’”<sup>4</sup>

If you’ve ever had a small animal die in your chimney, or in the crawlspace under your house, you can imagine the sensory blast that family received when they rolled the stone away, not to mention when they unwrapped the burial clothes. The stench of death surrounded them, got in their own hair and on their own clothes. But imagine the explosive recollection that smell would later bring them, as they remembered the day when their lost brother was brought back to them.

And now, in the next chapter of the story, another happy trip wire is laid in a family’s memories, as people who are so incredibly thankful for what Jesus has done for them host a celebratory dinner party in his honor. The resurrected Lazarus sits at the table with Jesus, and I have to wonder – was the smell completely gone? How many baths does it take to wash away the stench of four days of death?

But in that moment, another odor -- a much more pleasing odor -- fills the room as Mary opens up a container of pure nard. The extravagance of her offering is made clear in the text. One denarius amounted to roughly one day’s wage, so the cost of a container worth three hundred would represent more than 80% of a person’s annual income. As she empties the full contents out over Jesus’ feet, we are told that the whole house was filled with “the fragrance of the perfume.” The smell of death is suddenly overcome by the smell of life – or what Biblical scholar Karoline Lewis has called “the smell of extravagant love.”<sup>5</sup>

The only one not transported by this generous outpouring of thanksgiving was Judas. Admittedly, he speaks in rational terms. The perfume could have been used another way. It could have been sold and the money given to the poor. But somehow his comment does not smell quite right. There is at least a whiff of selfishness and bitterness in his voice, and that sense is confirmed by the text. Judas wasn’t worried about the poor. He was upset

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://defeatdespair.com/2021/07/27/like-poignant-land-mines-2/>

<sup>4</sup> John 11:38-44.

<sup>5</sup> Karoline Lewis <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/simultaneous-smells>

that he would not have the chance to skim a little more off the top, to steal a bit of value for himself.

The contrast between the stench of Judas' bitterness and the welcoming fragrance of the perfume on Jesus' feet is just one more way that this story points us toward the spiritual value of thanksgiving, especially the expression of thanksgiving for those who make our lives brighter and better. It is a value that goes back to the very foundations of Judaism. Roughly forty times in the Old Testament, scripture describes the burnt offerings of the Hebrew people rising up from the altar as "a pleasing odor to the Lord."<sup>6</sup> There were a number of goals and purposes for these sacrifices – for praise, as atonement for sin, for reconciliation and peace – but many of them were offered as thanksgiving. It was a way to embody the gratitude of the people for all that God had done for them. The meat of a dove, a lamb, or a bull would be thrown on the fire, and the pleasing aroma as it cooked would rise up to God, a message of thanksgiving to the God who had heard their cries, set them free from their bondage, fed them in the wilderness, and brought them to the Promised Land. That smell might be another one of those powerful memories in the closets of your mind, happy times that come rushing back whenever you smell a backyard barbeque.

So, when Judas tried to shame Mary for wasting the beautiful aroma of the perfume on a lavish anointing of Jesus' feet, Jesus was quick to correct him. Jesus received the offering as it was intended – a generous act of gratitude and thanksgiving poured out for the man who had saved her brother and could save her, too. The room filled with the smell of thanksgiving, and it was a pleasing odor to the Lord.

The same thing still happens when we, as the church, practice the spiritual discipline of thanksgiving. When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, he urged the church to practice thanksgiving as a way to bring glory to God. It was his regular practice to give thanks for the people in his churches – for their support, for their endurance and perseverance even in suffering, and -- most especially -- for their faith and love. He understood thanksgiving to be a critical aspect of the work of the church. And, to the Corinthians, he explained why. "*We are the aroma of Christ,*" Paul wrote. "*We are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life... For we are not peddlers of God's word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence.*"<sup>7</sup>

When we give thanks for each other – for example, when we pause to thank Marge Lindblom for her steadfast commitment to the ministries of Larchmont Avenue Church... when we take time to thank God for sending Anna Grace Claunch to join us in this work... whenever we just look around and see the people who are here with us in this fellowship and shared ministry... then we will find that this house is filled with the fragrance of true and authentic thanksgiving, which not only reminds the world that death does not win, but also rises up as a pleasing offering to the Lord.

In life and in death, in hellos and goodbyes, there is so much to be thankful for. May gratitude be our offering to God and each other today and every day.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

---

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/topical.show/RTD/cgg/ID/2904/Aroma-of-Burnt-Offering.htm>

<sup>7</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:15-17.