

The Smell of Love

John 12:1-8

Lent 5: March 13, 2016

I'm indebted to Karoline Lewis, www.workingpreacher.org, and her column, "Dear Working Preacher", for the image of smell in this passage, contrasting the smell of Mary's love, with the presence of death.

She couldn't get the smell of death out of her nostrils. It seemed to cling to her—her clothes, her hair, her skin. It didn't matter where she went, or how many times she had bathed, the smell went with her. It didn't matter that Lazarus was now alive and eating with their friends; he had still been dead for 4 days. 4 days, and in this heat! When the stone was removed from the tomb, the stench of death was overpowering. It takes a lot of life and living to erase that smell. They had warned Jesus not to remove the stone; Martha said, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." (11:39) But Jesus went ahead and had the stone removed, saying, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" And then he called, "Lazarus, come out!" And out walked Lazarus, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth—dead man walking. And even though Lazarus was alive, every time she looked at him, she could still see those grave clothes clinging to him, and smell that awful smell of death.

It wasn't just the physical death that left a stench, though, but also the feeling of foreboding that filled her these days. Yes, Lazarus was alive again—what a miracle! But she had this awful feeling that something was going to happen to Jesus—there was so much animosity against Jesus. When he raised Lazarus, many people believed in him. They were astonished at what had happened, and eager to be near Jesus. But there were also those who were angry at Jesus, at what he had done. They went to the Pharisees, to tell them about all the signs that Jesus was performing. These signs were a threat—"If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation," they said. Jesus was in so much danger. He had stayed away from their house for a while after raising Lazarus; he knew it was dangerous.

But it was the Passover, and many travelled to Jerusalem for this sacred time. She had been hoping Jesus would just celebrate the Passover in Ephraim, where he was safe. But no, he said he needed to be in Jerusalem, and so here he was, and

her feelings of sadness and doom were stronger than ever. The stench of death was almost overwhelming.

Lazarus seemed oblivious to this, though. There he was, reclining like all of them, at table, right beside Jesus. In fact, he was so close to Jesus he was practically reclining on Jesus. And suddenly, she had a vision of Jesus' death; for while Lazarus was alive, she could still see the grave clothes clinging to him, and as she watched Lazarus and Jesus, what she saw was Death reclining on Jesus! Jesus had the power to bring Lazarus back to life, but Death had its hold on Jesus, and she could hardly bear it.

It was then that she thought of the perfume. She knew she couldn't banish death, at least, not its stench, but she needed to smell something pleasant. She had saved her money for a long time to buy this expensive perfume with a smell so wonderful she could hardly describe it. She wasn't exactly sure what she would do with it, but knew that it was worth every penny and that when the time came, she would know what to do with it. And so in the face of death, she went and got the bottle of perfume, and because she loved Jesus, because she was so grateful to him for raising Lazarus and giving them all another chance at life, she poured this expensive perfume on his feet. She wasn't exactly sure why she felt drawn to his feet—she actually had meant to pour it on his head, that beautiful head where so many ideas were born; that head that saw the world so differently, that held the eyes that could penetrate deep inside a person and know their innermost thoughts and feelings. She intended to anoint his head.

But then she saw his feet stretched out behind him as he reclined—those feet that had carried him for so many miles; feet that had crossed dusty and rocky ground; that had endured the wilderness and other long journeys. When she saw his feet, she could see in them the pain of his daily life—how much was demanded of him, how much he endured. And so she poured the perfume on his feet before she could think of anything else. As she anointed Jesus' feet, she felt as if she was blessing him for all the ways in which he had blessed her and others; caught up in the perfume too, was the gratitude she felt toward him for bringing Lazarus back to life, and in that painful, foreboding way, she felt as if she was saying good-bye. It was as if this act of pouring perfume on his feet was itself an anointing for what was coming next. She wanted to protect him from death's presence—this feeling of foreboding had gotten stronger with each stroke of her

hand; she wanted this wonderful smell to assure him that he wasn't alone, that she would never abandon him. Her hair came loose as she was bending over his feet, and without thinking, she used it to wipe his feet. It was the ultimate act of love.

Mary is unaware that with her very body, she has taken on the posture that Jesus will take in the next chapter, when he also stoops over the feet of those he loves, washes them with water, and wipes them with a towel. Mary with her hair, and Jesus with the towel, perform the same action, and with the same motivation—love. “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

The scent of Mary's love for Jesus filled the room. It did not dispel the odour of death—Death was still waiting for Jesus. But the scent of love stood next to death as a testament to the power that love has to hold its own in the presence of death. Life and death exist together; the smell of love and the smell of death remind us we are human; we, like Jesus, exist between these 2 powerful forces; we can't escape them, nor ever forget that they both exist. Mary certainly didn't; even with Lazarus alive again, she was very aware of how death still clung to him and waited for Jesus. But, for a while, the wonderful smell that filled the room even in the presence of death was a welcome thing! It didn't banish death; it didn't mean that death doesn't exist. After all, we can only really smell life when we have smelled death. But the smell of love provides the contrast to the odour of death so that we know there is something greater than death; something more powerful. With the anointing of Jesus' feet, the smell of love and life also now adorn his body, along with death, which is reclining on him. She can't stop death, but she affirms through her actions, that love and life will triumph, even when it isn't immediately obvious how that will happen.

Perhaps it is also Mary's action that Paul had in mind when he wrote in 2 Corinthians 2:14-16: “But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. ¹⁵ For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; ¹⁶ to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.” Mary, by her actions, spread the fragrance of love that came from knowing Jesus; it was the fragrance from life to life—the smell of love. Judas, in contrast, could not

handle the fragrance of love that filled the room. Perhaps it threatened him; perhaps it highlighted for him the tenuous nature of his relationship with Jesus, of his love for Jesus. In any case, the smell of love was for him the fragrance from death to death. It so offended him that he used the poor as the object of his disapproval. He used the poor as a weapon to discredit Mary's act of love—"if she was going to waste this perfume, why didn't she sell it and use the money to help the poor?!" He is like so many politicians who say all the right words, but don't embody those words with actions or policies. He was willing to ruin someone else's reputation—to twist and distort their actions—in order to make himself look better.

The stench of death fills our world in so many ways. It is almost overwhelming to list the many ways in which death longs to rob us of hope and love and joy. Daily, the powers of death fight to have the last word. Our news is filled with images that confirm this: the little Syrian boy lying on the beach, streams of refugees and displaced persons seeking safety and shelter; the bodies of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice and countless other young black people lying on the streets of our cities; the hatred and vitriolic speech that we hear multiple times a day from presidential candidates. Death is reclining in our streets, showing up on our computer screens and in our newspapers, threatening to overpower even a whiff of love.

But we, like Mary, can defy the powers of death in our world every time we use our bodies "to spread in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing Christ". When we allow our lives and our actions to be the aroma of Christ in our schools, our workplaces, our communities where we live, we embody the same love that Mary did; a love that says, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples." By our actions, we stand with Jesus in saying to those who would use the poor as objects or weapons for their own means, "Leave her alone". By his words, Jesus pronounced this action of love to be care for the poor; this wasteful pouring out, this smell that permeated every corner of the room, to be the proper response in the face of death. He pronounced this action holy.

Death may be reclining on our streets, but the aroma of Christ's love is also there, providing shelter for the homeless, binding up the wounds of the injured, comforting those who grieve, feeding those who are hungry, protesting the injustices in our world. Through our actions of love, we spread the fragrance that

comes from knowing Christ. Every time we “waste” an hour or a day in loving service to another; every time we throw away good money on an organization that is doing the work of peace and justice; every time we give up precious time for oneself and offer it to another, we have participated in spreading this holy wasteful aroma of Christ.

What is foolishness in the eyes of the world—in the presence of death—is God’s wisdom. It is taking seriously the passage that Jesus quotes, from Deuteronomy 15:11: “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.’” Those in power would have us believe the powers of death that want to divert our attention from the poor and oppressed, to close our hands to the poor, to become callous because we will always have the poor in our midst, to the things they deem to be important. Mary’s act of love reminds us of the power we have to be the aroma of Christ wherever we are. In countless small and large ways, we can spread the love of Christ.

Death may be reclining in our streets, but so is Love. It is embodied in each of Jesus’ followers who love others as Christ has loved them. May we be that living ink; the aroma of Christ.