

May 25, 2014 - Easter 6A - Memorial Day Sunday

“*The Sense of Smell: A Fragrant Offering*” -- Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: 1 Peter 3:13-22; Acts 17:22-31; John 14:15-21

Whenever I was at my Grandmother and Grandfather Jones' house on First Avenue in Columbus, Ohio, there was a smell at the bottom of the stairs going into the living room. I think it may have been dried lavender set in a little bowl. I will recognize the smell if it ever comes to me again, and in smelling it, I will be in the middle of the memories of my grandparents' home. At the bottom of the stairs there, I remember the smell of my grandfather as I sat on his lap and he drew pictures for me - the smell of aftershave, alcohol and cigarettes. I remember the smell of the honeysuckle bush by their garage, and the oil and gas on the floor of the garage.

Contrarily, one of the most traumatic events of my life was an experience at Abbott Northwestern hospital while I was a chaplain there. I won't go into the details because they were horrific. Of all the memories I have of that experience, though, the most difficult to deal with is the memory of the smell. For almost 3 weeks after the event, the odor was still in my nostrils, or so it seemed to me.

I have a pretty sensitive sense of smell, though, and that can make things a little difficult. I smell things going bad before most others can smell it. Brief whiffs of odors in the world are often caught by me. It is a blessing and a curse. Sometimes, the attempt to cover up a bad smell is worse for me because I can sense both the good and the bad smell. I have made and lost friends based on such things. But that is true for everyone at some level, isn't it? Depending on your associations, a good smell to one can be horrible for someone else because more than any other sense smell is all about associations. If you fell into the thorns of a rose bush when you were very young, you might associate the smell of roses with pain. Things that are without question bad for you, like cigarettes, might instead bring back memories of good times with a grandfather.

The sense of smell - olfaction is the technical name for it - is the most mysterious of all the senses. No other sense triggers the fulness of a memory quicker than catching the odor of something; no other sense is more tied to our emotions than smell. This is because, unlike all the other senses, smell is tied directly into the same areas of the brain that control emotions, long-term processing and learning and memory. Unlike other senses that have areas of the brain reserved for them, the sense of smell is linked across the brain. As a result, when you smell something, your brain is pulling from across the entire landscape of the mind to identify it.

Did you know that over 1000 genes - 3% of our genetic material - is allocated to the sense of smell? This means, rather than responding to predetermined odors which have particular receptors in the olfactory bulb in your head, there are instead an infinite number of combinations available to catalogue and identify smells. There is even the recent suggestion that smell actually functions on the level of quantum wavelengths, which would make it the most sensitive sense of all. We know very little about the sense of smell, and it is the mystery of scent which makes it so much like our spiritual experience.

Paul says in his second letter to the Corinthians,

In the Messiah, in Christ, God leads us from place to place in one perpetual victory parade. Through us, he brings knowledge of Christ. Everywhere we go, people breathe in the exquisite fragrance. Because of Christ, we give off a sweet scent rising to God, which is recognized by those on the way of salvation—an aroma redolent with life. But those on the way to destruction treat us more like the stench from a rotting corpse. (The Msg., 2 Corinthians 2:14-16).

Do we bring with us the fragrance of Christ in our daily lives? It is a weird idea, isn't it? I think it is important to understand something about this idea. When we speak of the sense of smell, we are, probably more than any other sense of the body, speaking of *mystery, the unknown*.

When we walk into the mysterious and the unknown, we try to quantify it, measure it, solidify it, make it known. It is very difficult to be in the presence of the mysterious. Paul tells the Athenians this in his speech at Mars Hill, which is just below the Parthenon. It is a flat area where the free men of Athens would gather to discuss the ideas of the day. Here, Paul walks around the idols and icons of the religion of the day, with the gathered gods and goddesses, and then stops at the statue to the unknown God. He says,

"When I arrived here the other day, I was fascinated with all the shrines I came across. And then I found one inscribed, to the god nobody knows. I'm here to introduce you to this God so you can worship intelligently, know who you're dealing with" (The Msg., Acts 17:23).

Paul then tells them that the unknown God is the one True God who is seeking them, not the other way around. The invisibility of God makes God hard to accept, but Paul says,

"He makes the creatures; the creatures don't make him. Starting from scratch, he made the entire human race and made the earth hospitable, with plenty of time and space for living so we could seek after God, and not just grope around in the dark but actually find him. He doesn't play hide-and-seek with us. He's not remote; he's near. We live and move in him, can't get away from him! One of your poets said it well: 'We're the God-created'" (The Msg., Acts 17:25-30).

It is our very senses which allow us to become aware of the presence of the Lord.

Like the sense of smell, God is mysterious and invisible. But we can 'catch a whiff' of the presence of God. Jesus makes God known in the physical, bodily actions of his life, and by way of the Holy Spirit, we make Christ present for others by embodying a Christ-like life so others might pick up on the scent of God.

When I was at the Benedictine monastery, it was very clear that every aspect of our senses was being used to bring the congregation closer to God. For the sense of smell, they used incense. Based on past experience at the commune and at the homes of friends, I prepared myself for an overwhelming smell followed by an allergic reaction to all the smoke and richness of the odor. At the commune and in homes of new-age friends, they would use super-rich concoctions of patchouli or lavender or some spice, like cinnamon. I am not a big fan of incense because of my past experience. But then the monk walked by with the censer and I was surprised to not be overwhelmed. Instead, the odor was light, gentle, calming. It was a mix of frankincense, with a hint of maybe rose and some sort of wood-like smell. I found myself waiting for it when the monk walked through the little chapel.

Reading our verses for today, it occurs to me that we should not only desire the scent of God, but also seek to create and become it for others in the world. If we decide becoming like Christ in all our senses, part of following Jesus Christ means becoming like the sense we are seeking to inspire.

And that is a difficult thing, because we want to make things concrete and clear for people, but the sense of smell is not concrete and clear - it is ethereal and nuanced.

We want to make people understand us and our faith, but the sense of smell does not demand understanding because it is so tied into our associations and memories. Instead, we have to seek to understand other people - their stories and their associations and memories. We have to catch a scent of their world and the gardens they walk in.

We want others to think we know instead of inviting them to discover with us what we do not know.

Becoming like the sense of smell with others means allowing the mystery of God to be present. This is the unknown God Paul speaks of at Mars Hill. It means that we must also be present with the unknown aspects of God. We trust in what we do know - Jesus Christ, Him crucified and resurrected - so we might enter confidently into what we do not know - the experiences, associations and memories of others.

This is really the work of the Holy Spirit, the Helper Jesus promises to us in his words to us today. The purpose of the Holy Spirit, we hear, is to live in God and to love one another. The works of love and life for and with one another are meant to be a fragrant offering for the Lord.

Last week, we spoke about giving and tithing and what that means for our church, who we are and who we would like to become. We can think about our giving in relationship to the senses - what does it sound like to ourselves and others?

what does it look like to God?

What does it feel like to our spiritual sensibilities?

Does it leave a bad taste in our mouths?

Scripture often talks of the smell of our offerings:

*Ps 66:15 -- I will offer to you burnt offerings of fattened animals,
with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams;
I will make an offering of bulls and goats. Selah*

Ezekiel 16:18-19 -- And you took your embroidered garments to cover them, and set my oil and my incense before them. Also my bread that I gave you—I fed you with fine flour and oil and honey—you set before them for a pleasing aroma; and so it was, declares the Lord God.

The story in Matthew 26 of the woman who gives the expensive perfume and anoints Jesus with it as an offering to him.

Phil 4:18 -- I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.

Eph 5:2 -- And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

When we apply the work of the Holy Spirit, the work of love and fullness of life, to the sense of smell, we come up with strange and inspiring questions:

What does God smell like?

What is the scent of love?

What kind of scent will this particular action leave behind? Will it smell like Christ?

Can we follow the scent of God and pick up on God's presence among us?

When we pay attention to the sense of smell, those smells which bring you into good memories and experiences, we walk in the mystery of God. When we seek out the mystery of God in others, we can catch the scent of the fragrant offerings of Jesus Christ in the lives of other people. Give time for the associations and memories to wash over you. They will be different for everyone - a polyphonic symphony, a flurry of unusual color combinations, a delicate differentiation of tastes, a sensitivity of touch and feeling, and a wash of personal and deep memories and associations brought on by a bouquet of scents and smells.

Maybe the experience for you or the other person will be like the smell of the ocean from the Breakwater; like walking through a pine forest at the beginning of winter; like the ionic, brisk smell of atmosphere during a lightning storm; like mulch in the spring, split wood in the fall.

Maybe it will be like a lasagna with garlic and oregano cooking in your mother's kitchen; cinnamon on top of hot chocolate at Christmas-time; cilantro.

Maybe it is like the scent of a baby's head or a new puppy.

The memories, associations, emotions and experiences are all a part of the sense of smell. We enter into the vast mystery of the life God has in store for us when we engage those mysteries. It is as if in those particularly evocative, deep and pleasant smells that we are catching a whiff of the first Garden, a memory of the innocence and perfection Christ intends for each one of us, calling us to turn around and come back to the garden of the Lord. Our desire to not only return but to also become the scent of the garden of the Lord is the source of our offerings to God and to one another, our offering of love which fulfills the commandment of Christ to us to love one another.

St. Ephrem the Syrian wrote in one of his Hymns on Paradise:

*A vast censer
exhaling fragrance
impregnates the air
with its odoriferous smoke,
imparting to all who are near it
a whiff from which to benefit.
How much the more so
with Paradise the glorious:
even its fence assists us,
modifying somewhat
that curse upon the earth
by the scent of its aromas.*

The sense of smell is highly trainable. It allows access to many memories, experiences and new ways of knowing. Some, like perfumers and chefs, make their living according to the discernment of smells and scents. The possibilities are endless and the Lord has made it so in this particular sense. It is in the aromas and fragrant scents that we know what we give and receive are pleasing to the Lord. I encourage you to allow yourself to spiritually engage the sense of smell now, downstairs during fellowship and throughout your day and week. The

sense of smell means entering into the unknown, invisible and powerful ways of the Lord, and that means trusting the fragrant offering of the resurrected Jesus Christ for each one of us.

Amen.