

Filled with the Fragrance

COMMUNION

April 3, 2022

John 12: 1-8

¹ Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³ 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. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

⁶ 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. ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Philippians 3: 4b-14

^{4b} If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness

of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

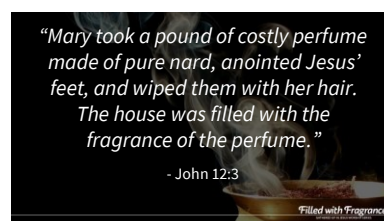


Today's gospel passage centers on a great gift given in love. It is an awesome and amazing gift that Mary gives to Jesus.

Last Sunday we observed the loving father give a similar gift to his wayward son. The father also attempts to do the same for the older son. Both gifts given were extraordinary – well beyond any expectations that anyone could have had. The questions for us today are these: first, how are we filled with the fragrance of Christ? Second, how do we share that fragrance with others? As we prepare to see how we are and can be “filled with fragrance”, first consider the greatest gift you’ve ever received. Think about that gift – whether material or not – and recall how you felt about the greatest gift ever when you received it... Maybe you were humbled. Maybe you were embarrassed. Maybe you were speechless. Or maybe you uttered a “You shouldn’t have” because you couldn’t come up with anything else to say. As we press on this morning, keep those feelings and thoughts in mind. Let us pray...

Our passage from John's gospel begins with Jesus and the disciples arriving at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. This home is a familiar stop for Jesus. It is a place of comfort and welcome. These three would be counted as some of Jesus' closest friends outside the twelve disciples. Chapter 11 ends with Jesus raising Lazarus to life after being dead for four days. This triggers the religious leaders to begin plotting the death of Jesus. Jesus and the disciples then lay low in Ephraim, a town in the region near the wilderness. As Passover nears, Jesus then begins the final trek to Jerusalem, stopping once again at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

As our passage begins, we read, *"Six days before the Passover..."* Six days before – this means that in just five days Jesus will be crucified. Six days before – this also means that the next day Jesus will triumphally enter Jerusalem to the waving of palms and to shouts of *"Hosanna."* That is next Sunday for us. Jesus and his disciples, along with Lazarus and others, gather around the table as Martha serves them dinner. During the meal, *"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."* Mary took perfume, a jar worth a year's wages, and poured it over Jesus' feet. She then wiped his feet with her hair. In this way Mary took this moment with her. Six days before the Passover. There is a connection between this extravagant gift that Mary offers and Jesus' death and burial.



Judas Iscariot responds immediately. He protests what he considers a waste, asking, *"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"* In a way Judas was saying, "You shouldn't have."

But he does not really ask or protest out of a concern for the poor. In the next verse we learn of his true motive. It is hard to steal from the beautiful fragrance that now fills the air. Money in the purse would be easier to access. Since that is not possible now, Judas condemns the whole act as wasteful. Jesus defends Mary's actions, saying, "*Leave her alone.*" He goes on to point out that Mary bought this extravagant gift to one day use it to prepare Jesus for his burial. This was that day. To add emphasis to the fact that his days are numbered, Jesus adds, "*You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.*" There will be time, lots of time, to serve and to give to and to care for the poor. Jesus' time is limited. Mary's wonderful gift has occurred at just the right time. That beautiful fragrance hung in the air as this whole exchange took place. What a contrast that fragrance was to the aromas of greed and arrogance wafting up from Judas.

Jesus' response to Judas defends the gift that Mary gave in that moment. Sometimes that's the best gift we ever receive, when someone lays all else aside to pour out a gift upon us. Sometimes they are small things in the scope of the affairs of the world. But even then, these small gifts can have a big impact. Have you all heard of Adam Hamilton? He is the lead pastor of the biggest United Methodist church in America. Back in 2012, in my first year of ministry, Pastor Doug and I went to the Leadership Institute hosted by Hamilton's mega-church. Thousands of people from all over come to this three-day training event. On our first day there, as we wandered down a hallway looking for the rooms that our classes would be in, who takes the time to stop us in the hall, sensing we were lost, giving us both directions to our classrooms? Yes, it was Adam Hamilton. Certainly, he was on his way to lead some big important class. But he laid that aside and took all the time in the world for Doug and me.

It was a lesson I try to follow to this day: everyone is worthy of my time and attention. Stop and help when God places someone in your path.



In a similar way, fragrances or aromas are powerful triggers for us. They bring us back to memories and moments, to experiences we have had. Mary anointed Jesus' feet to cover the aroma of death soon to come. Turning back to chapter 11, we are reminded of this fragrance. In verse 14 John records that Lazarus has died. He then lay in the tomb for four days before Jesus came to town. When Jesus tells them to take away the stone, Martha protests, saying, *"Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days."* The tomb was filled with the aroma of death. Yet, in quick order, Jesus tells her to just believe as he calls Lazarus from the tomb. Lazarus goes from dead to being alive, from causing a stench to what? What does the fragrance of life smell like? To live again was an extravagant gift from Jesus to Lazarus, to Mary and Martha. What aroma did Lazarus now exude?

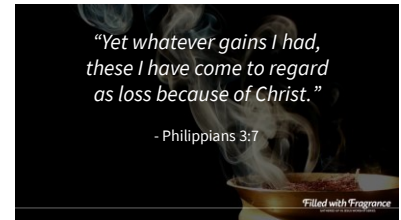
In today's gospel text, Mary is the giver and Jesus is the receiver. The fragrance of the perfume was one gift that she offered as she prepared Jesus' body for burial. It sweetly filled the room. Her second gift was the compassion that she had for her Lord and Savior. Mary understood what was soon to come. She knew that Jesus' was walking towards his death. The anointing was her beautiful response of love for Jesus. Unable and perhaps unwilling to intercede on his behalf to stop the sacrifice soon to be made, she simply offered this gift of love to give thanks to the one who had saved her many years ago.

For Mary, this was a pouring out of self, an act of surrender and of giving to the one that she loved so deeply. Because of that, the aroma of this gift of love certainly sweetened the fragrance that had already filled the air.

Mary's gift was so pure, so simple, so honest. She did not think about the cost, only of the giving. Through this extraordinary gift, Mary is demonstrating an understanding of the kind of loving service that Jesus calls for from his followers. In turn, Jesus points out to Judas, to the other disciples, and to us, that no gift is wasteful when given in love and that no act of service can be demeaning when given in love, no matter how humble a gift. Here we pause to return to what you were asked to think about at the beginning of this time together. Again, I ask the question: what was the greatest gift you ever received? When have we been the recipient of a gift like the one Jesus received from Mary? Maybe more importantly, when have we given such a gift to another?

Turn with me to Philippians 3 as we now connect into the gift that God offers us in Christ Jesus. As our passage begins, Paul lists his accolades, his accomplishments, his credentials. This list would build quite the resume in first century Judaism: circumcised on the proper day, a member of the nation of Israel and of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee full of zeal for the Law, one who was righteous, even blameless. All of this confidence in the flesh reminds me of those people who always appear to be running for man or woman of the year. For any of Paul's contemporaries, this would be quite the list of accolades. I wonder, what fragrance filled the air as Paul bragged about his credentials?

As he appears to be building himself up, suddenly, in verse 7 Paul zigs where we thought he might zag. Reversing course, here Paul states, *“Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.”* This noteworthy background – all of these accolades and accomplishments – Paul now sees them as a liability rather than as achievements. Here Paul is echoing some of Jesus’s words often repeated in the gospels: the last will be first and one must lose their life to gain true life. Considering all that he gave up, things of great value according to the world’s standards, this was a big gift that Paul gave for Christ. And more personally, how great a gift it is to Christ when we give up our pride, our anger, our selfishness. When we do so we create an atmosphere that is filled with fragrance – the sweet smell of surrender.



Last Sunday, I asked you to write “the rest of the story” for the prodigal son or for the loving father or for the older brother. The ideas of giving up our pride, our anger, our selfishness resounded in the stories that you shared. One person wrote about the older brother, saying, “He watched his father’s love and how his younger brother was redeemed. His actions led the older brother to forgive and see true, faithful love.” Another wrote, “The younger brother stayed and with his new love and forgiveness little by little showed his sorrow and eventually won over his older brother. He showed his brother the pain of time away and his regret at his decisions and asked for forgiveness and was granted that forgiveness.” As these stories illustrate, Christ has the power to transform and change lives. But it is not always easy to give up self, to surrender to God.

When we cannot or do not surrender, we suffer. What happens when instead of surrendering to Christ, we hold tightly to our titles or to the ways that people perceive us? How do we suffer when we allow titles or others' perceptions of us to define us? Doesn't that impede our journey or faith and, in turn, limit our effectiveness for the gospel? We can also look down upon other people's lack of accolades or titles or status. When we do so, that limits how we see them and how we then offer gifts or forgiveness or mercy or love. That was the struggle for the older brother last week. He could not move past what the prodigal son had done. In the language of John 12, the prodigal son still reeked of pig slop and the older brother just couldn't forgive that aroma that still lingered in the air.

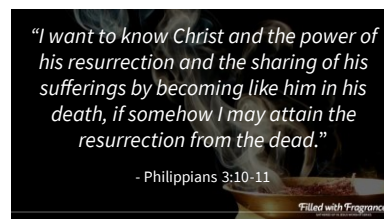
Connecting these thoughts back to the gospel lesson, Judas' objection to the gift was based on his desire to hold the purse strings, to maintain his place of authority, so that he could work it to his own advantage. From this place of evil intent, what kind of fragrance was it that rose up around Judas? Is it not unlike the aroma that we produce when we seek to limit access to God, to the church, or to faith based on another person's lack of status or place in society?

Just as Jesus' call to love and value all people opened wide access to the kingdom of God, Paul is turning cultural power on its head as he emphasizes that living in God's kingdom is not about us but is all about Christ. Paul regards all his accolades and accomplishments as loss *"because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."* For the sake of knowing Christ, Paul has suffered loss – beatings and stonings, imprisonments and shipwrecks – all for the sake of being found in Christ. In Christ, through faith, Paul has come to know what real righteousness is.

Paul's love for Christ mirrors Mary's love for Christ. For both, Jesus is their all in all. Both are surrendering self to Christ, being poured out for his sake.

Paul then takes it one step further in verses 10 and 11. These words are a powerful and transparent admission. In these verses Paul writes, *"I want*

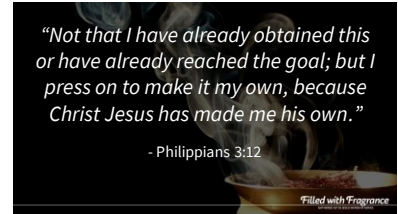
to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead." Here



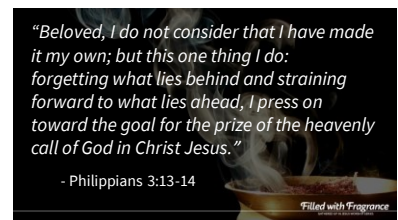
the greatest missionary ever admits that he does not have a complete grasp on the mysteries of Christ. Here Paul is admitting that he still has a long way to go in his discipleship. Here Paul is longing for God's grace to continue to be at work in him, to help him to better know the power of Christ's resurrection.

This admission, this longing – they are great reminders for us all. If one is new to the faith, these words are a reminder that all are saved by grace alone. Our past and our sins do not hold us apart from God's grace. If all of the persecution of the church during his days as Saul did not keep Paul outside of God's grace, then all people everywhere are worthy to enter into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. If one has walked a long road with God, these words are a great reminder that we too still have a long way to go. If the great apostle Paul saw himself as one with a lot of room to yet grow in faith, then we too have room to grow. Admitting our shortcomings and longing for God's grace to move us ever closer to righteousness – these are reminders that we need to hear again and again as we seek to walk daily in faith. They are reminders that as we walk faithfully day by day, we have opportunities to pour out the aroma of Christ.

As Paul longs to “*attain the resurrection from the dead*”, his attention and longing are drawn heavenward. Our Epistle passage draws near to a close, we turn to verse 12. Here we read, “*Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.*” Echoing the desire to continue to grow in Christ, Paul identifies his ultimate end goal as attaining the resurrection from the dead – joining Jesus in heaven. Paul commits to “pressing on” in faith, walking faithfully as he draws closer and closer to the day of glory. He does so because he knows that he belongs to Jesus. I wonder, what fragrance comes from Paul as presses on, longing to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings?



I believe the aroma would be the same as the fragrance that filled the room as Mary anointed Jesus’ feet. The fragrance of love that filled the room also pours forth from Paul as he gives words to his desire to grow closer and closer to Jesus as well as to his deep longing to entering Christ’s presence, to attain his heavenly prize. Hear his desire in verses 13 and 14: “*Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*” Looking only forward, leaving his past behind him, Paul sets his eyes and heart on Jesus, straining forward, as he presses on toward the goal, the prize of his call heavenward. These beautiful words and the image they create also call out to us and give us guidance for our journey of faith.



As we close, one last story from last Sunday that illustrates how our lives can be filled with the fragrance of Christ. This was titled, “The Son Who Was Forgiven.” Here is what was shared: “How he must have felt – so thankful. Actually



couldn't believe it when his father was so good to him. He lived a life of thankfulness and of giving to others.” The fragrance of love that settled upon the son who was forgiven changed him. The father's love and forgiveness and goodness transformed the son. The prodigal son became one who sought to give these things away.

My friends, when we are filled with the fragrance of Christ, we too have the power to change lives, to transform lives, to give away love, forgiveness, and goodness. As we go forth this day, may we give off the fragrance of love in our daily lives as we seek to faithfully live as disciples of Jesus Christ. May we seek to be people of love, forgiveness, and goodness. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As you think about the gifts of love that you have received from God and from others, how have these led to growth in your faith?
- 2) *Pray*. Where might the Spirit be asking you to offer a gift to Christ? Pray for guidance and direction to give or surrender this to the Lord.
- 3) *Study*. Read Mark 14:3-9. What differences and similarities are there with the account we read in John 12? Do the overall messages/meanings change?