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Lent 5C
Peace, Seattle
March 21, 2010 epk
John 12:1-8, Phil 3:4b-14

AROMA OF DEVOTION

The aroma of freshly baked bread left it's olfactory mark on me early on. From the time I was Naomi's age I would help mother on baking days, as she turned out cookies for "welcome home" treats after school, and fresh buns for Friday's hamburgers; the sweet dough that would be transformed into cinnamon rolls for Sunday morning, and the crescent rolls for that night's supper.

Later, I took on that tradition with my own family, bending weekly over the kitchen counter to fold and knead the ingredients that would become our daily bread, inviting my children into the task.

To this day, the smell of bread baking is the smell of home, of family, of love.

Science teaches us that smell, emotion, and memory share closely networked real estate in the brain's limbic system.[1] Because of this our sense of smell evokes quick, intense reaction to odors,[2] and influences how we experience life and process significant memories.

One scent of fresh bread, and I'm back in my mother's kitchen.

One whiff of an old classroom and I'm instantly transported back to Hawthorne Elementary in Havre, Montana.

It's the sense of smell in newborns that not only guides them to their mother's breastmilk, but is powerful enough to reduce their physical experience of pain.[3]

We get accustomed to the daily smells around us. So when we're exposed to something new, we really take notice.

I remember well a study trip to Kingston, Jamaica my senior year in seminary.
We stayed at a convent at the northern edge of the city, adjacent to the theological school where our classes convened.

On our first morning there it was the smells wafting through the slatted glass windows that brought me awake; a moist, sweetish scent that was a mingling of fragrant blossoms, decaying plant life, and human sweat, with an acrid dash of burning garbage mixed in—all suspended in the humid tropical air.

You have your own stories of remembered smells and odors and what they signify.

This morning, we find smell at the center of our gospel story.

First, the smells of a home preparing for a dinner party. Leeks and turnips, onions and lentils simmering on the stove with fresh baked barley loaves, and herbs to flavor the feast – mustard, cumin, chicory, garlic.

[1] Matthew Skinner, whose full article can be found at: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?tab=4
[2] Follow link to article and video about the Power of Smell, from BBC: http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/content/articles/2008/09/28/east_smells_s14_w2_feature.shtml
[3] See article at: http://www.babygooroo.com/index.php/2009/09/30/the-magic-of-mothers-milk/

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Thanks to Jesus, Mary and Martha had received their brother Lazarus back from beyond death's door, and this dinner for the Master was a gesture of pure devotion.

Some people have a knack for making themselves understood through the words that they speak or write. Only days before Martha had spoken her confession when Jesus had finally arrived, too late, for her brother's funeral.

LORD, she'd said, IF YOU'D HAVE BEEN HERE, MY BROTHER WOULD NOT HAVE DIED.
BUT EVEN NOW I KNOW THAT GOD WILL GIVE YOU WHATEVER YOU ASK OF HIM.

I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE, Jesus responded. DO YOU BELIEVE THIS?

YES, LORD, she confessed, I BELIEVE THAT YOU ARE THE MESSIAH, THE SON OF GOD, THE ONE COMING INTO THE WORLD.

In that moment Martha had articulated more clearly than any other disciple who Jesus truly was.

And now, this night, at the dinner they were giving in Jesus honor, it was Mary's turn…
Her turn to show him she knew who he was—only not, as her sister, with <u>words</u>, but with one soulful, extravagant <u>act</u> of affection and devotion.

With dinner in full swing, Mary takes her leave for a moment, returning with a jar in her hands; a flask filled with a full pound of precious perfume of nard.

Kneeling in front of the Lord, she unstops the flask, and as she slowly pours it over his feet and ankles, the intense, warm, musky fragrance fills the room, gathering everyone's attention instantly.[4]

"Mary's gift emits an aroma that saturates the house and the minds of everyone in it."[5]

Guests stop eating, conversations halt in mid-sentence, and heads swivel as Mary begins wiping Jesus feet with her hair.

According to John it is <u>Judas</u> who voiced objection to Mary's act. But I have a feeling <u>everyone in the house</u> that night formed an opinion about what Mary had done.
But the only opinion that mattered was the one offered by her Lord.
LEAVE HER ALONE, says Jesus, defending her. SHE BOUGHT THE PERFUME 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.

A careful study of this scene in John's gospel shows that a number of themes converge here.[6]
- Passover is near, and so too is Jesus' "hour." His time in Bethany soon after the scene when Lazarus was brought from the tomb and restored to life (11:1f) confirms that his end is coming, but Lazarus' presence at the table lets us know that death will not be the final word.
- And the sweet smell of Mary's perfume counters the stench at the tomb of Lazarus.

[4] For a description of the nard plant, *nardostachys jatamansi*, its origins and uses check out: http://www.biblefragrances.net/nard.html
[5] Ibid.
[6] For these insights, I'm indebted to Matthew Skinner, whose full article can be found at: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?tab=4

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- When Mary wipes Jesus' feet, her act prefigures a time when Jesus will wipe the feet of his disciples. (13:5)
- Judas, the betrayer, moves further into the dark in John's rendering, while Mary represents all that is of the light—pure and right. He is false, she is true. He is greedy and self-serving, she is generous and selfless in her devotion.

Mary's gift is beyond extravagant. In this one act she expends a quantity of perfume equal in cost to the annual wage of a laborer. Her gesture goes beyond the bounds of propriety, too.
At the very least, her sensual actions carry sexual overtones, threatening to make voyeurs out of the others who are present.

But none of this seems to matter to Jesus.
He receives the gift for what it is: a sumptuous and selfless sacrifice of thanksgiving.

In the light of Mary's gift all carefully calibrated acts of kindness; all elaborate scorekeeping; all petty pedigrees and self-regulated giving appears weak, stingy, and self-serving…a great pile of rubbish, in the words of St. Paul (who used still more colorful language in Greek).

There is only one way to respond to Mary's gift, and Jesus shows us, with his own life-ending, life-giving sacrifice, the extravagance of which exceeds anything that could ever be measured.

When Paul says, I WANT TO KNOW CHRIST AND THE POWER OF HIS RESURRECTION AND THE SHARING OF HIS SUFFERING BY BECOMING LIKE HIM IN HIS DEATH, IF SOMEHOW I MAY ATTAIN THE RESURRECTION FROM THE DEAD, he's experiencing the gravitational pull of that extravagant love.

What does grace smell like? What is the aroma of love?

What might it mean for you, for me, to make extravagant giving and living in the mold of Mary, part of our Lenten journey? To let the fragrance of our love's actions be "carried on the wind" to people and places we will never see?[7]

[7] H. Stephen Shoemaker, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 2*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 143.