

**A FRAGRANT OFFERING<sup>1</sup>**  
**Sermon, April 3, 2022**  
**The Fifth Sunday in Lent**  
**Text: John 12:1-8, Ephesians 5:1-2**

"Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Ephesians 5:1-2

The dictionary defines *fragrant* as "Having a pleasant odor." The dictionary defines *flagrant* as "*Conspicuously bad, offensive, or reprehensible, so offensive that it cannot escape notice.*" Only one letter can change the meaning of the word; this highlights that sometimes there's a fine line of distinction between what is *fragrant* and what is *flagrant*. I'm told of a Unitarian church in San Francisco that has a sign on the front three pews: "This is a FRAGRANCE-FREE PEW." These seats are reserved for those who wish to worship in a fragrance-free environment; there are people who suffer from allergies or other respiratory ailments who cannot tolerate being close to people wearing perfume or cologne. To such people the *fragrant* can easily become *flagrant*. When a wine "turns", the wine's aromatic bouquet turns into the nose-stinging stench of vinegar. Holy Week is full of the highs of **fragrant** devotion and the lows of **flagrant** betrayal. The night on which our Lord was betrayed, when the fragrance of a disciple's devotion turns into the flagrance, the stench, the vinegar of betrayal. And Friday, when the fragrance of crisp palms, with the hosannas and hallelujahs from the crowds of Palm Sunday turns to the flagrant and bitter bellowing of "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

I'm told that the average human nose is capable of discerning and identifying at least 10,000 different scents. Certain scents can create certain responses. Multi-billion dollar industries are built on the premise that smell is one of the most powerful mood triggers that there is. I've mentioned this in years past, but according to the Smell Treatment and Research Foundation in Chicago (*there really is such a place!*), better than ANY perfume for making him notice you, ladies, is the aroma of baked cinnamon buns. Forget the expensive Chanel # 5, just go spend \$2.95 for some Poppin' Fresh dough! Other aromas high on the list for attraction are pumpkin pie, doughnuts, cheese pizza, and strawberries. Peppermint scent is used in factories to reduce stress rising from repetitive chores. Lavender scents are suggested for insomniacs. Some hospitals have vanilla-scented MRI's help ease patient anxiety.

The sense of smell is also one of the most powerful triggers of *memory* that there is. One whiff, and an entire episode or event or person comes to mind! I'm told the Eastern Orthodox Church uses this bit of knowledge in a creatively worshipful way by offering a service of anointing for the congregation on the Wednesday of Holy Week. The fragrance of this act of worship and devotion lingers on the body throughout Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, and helps trigger an appropriate mood for remembrance and worship during these holy days.

Just prior to His entry into Jerusalem, Jesus was anointed with a very precious and fragrant ointment, and in all likelihood, the aroma of this precious act of devotion lingered with Him and perhaps even served to comfort Him throughout the terrible physical pain, the psychological torture, the severe isolation He was about to endure in the week ahead. The aromatic offering of a sincere, dearly devoted, tearfully grateful follower clung to Him throughout His ordeal, and no doubt gave Him *fragrant* wisps of comfort amidst the *flagrant* and overpowering stench of betrayal and death. Perhaps Jesus would smell the aroma throughout the ordeals of this week, and it would trigger the loving memory of a selfless, extravagant act of devotion from a dear and grateful woman, thus encouraging Him on as He accomplished the work necessary for our salvation.

John tells us that anointing took place on the night before Palm Sunday, when Jesus attended a dinner at a private home. We are told Lazarus was at the dinner. You know the story of Lazarus; he had just been raised back to life. And now, Lazarus now sits at table with Jesus, along with his sisters Martha and Mary.

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon was originally entitled "Being Bethany," but some late Saturday editing (mainly due to time constraints; I belatedly realized the sermon was too long for a Lord's Supper Sunday!) removed my initial introductory thoughts which inspired the original title ... and the bulletin was already printed. The title on this manuscript more accurately reflects the content.

Lazarus isn't given any lines, he doesn't really say anything in the narrative, but don't you wonder what he was thinking? I mean, what happened to him while he was dead? How did it feel? Did he see a bright light? Was he sitting there wondering is this heaven or is this earth? *"I ... I'm sure I was dead, but here I am."* Maybe since he was in the presence of Jesus, he couldn't really tell if this was heaven or earth. His sisters were just so grateful to have their brother back. Martha is doing what she does best, serving away. Then, at some point during the dinner, Mary got up and walked over to Jesus, knelt at His feet, and taking a pint of very expensive perfume, pours it on Jesus feet ... and then wipes His feet dry using her hair. The perfume was pure spikenard; at the time, this could only be found in the mountains of northern India. A pint of it cost three hundred denarii, which was nearly a year's wages. Think about this in terms of your annual income, just poured out on the feet of Jesus.

There is humility in Mary's act of anointing as she stoops to wipe Jesus' feet with her hair, and also just a whiff of scandal, as commentators tell us it was most unusual for a woman of that culture to ever be seen with her hair down. But Mary was in a private, safe space with family and friends who knew and loved her; she need not be concerned about appropriate social norms, snarky comments, judging eyes. She was simply offering an act of extravagant love and gratitude to Jesus in this home where demonstrable acts of extravagant love were more than likely not uncommon. She was tending to Jesus, the best she knew how. She was tending to Jesus, who she knew as her friend. She was tending to Jesus, Who she believed was the Son of God. She was tending to Jesus, Who had restored her brother to life. She was tending to Jesus, Who I'm sure she somehow intuitively anticipated was about to endure a horrific weeklong ordeal of betrayal, humiliation, pain and death. She was simply offering an act of extravagant love and gratitude to Jesus at a moment when everyone present was probably a little on edge. Judas spoke up. This perfume was being wasted! It could have been sold and the money given to the poor! What a *flagrant* waste! Jesus tells Judas to leave Mary alone. *"She had intended to keep this perfume for the day of my burial, but chose to give it to Me now. You always have the poor with you, but you will not always have Me."*

Mary was doing what I like to call "sending flowers to the living." Too often we wait until someone we love has died before we send flowers; well, they really won't be able to enjoy them, then! It is so common for us to spend our energy and focus our attention trying to "fix" what's wrong with our lives or our society, to rant against and worry about The Big Things, and in the process forget to do the simple and thoughtful things that tend to the loving relationships in our lives. Mary's simple but extravagant act of love toward Jesus reminds us to take time to give flowers to the living, to show expressions of love to the ones who are close to us *while we can*, to do what we can to express our love and gratitude, even if it seems almost inappropriate because of all that needs to be done "out there." John records that, *"The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."* It seems like mere description, but I think he's making an important point: Mary's seemingly extravagant act of simple love and kindness at her home in Bethany did not end at Jesus' feet. The fragrance of her act of love, devotion and gratitude affected everyone in the place! When we practice what may seem to be extravagant acts of love, devotion and gratitude in our various "Bethanys," as we "love one another as He has loved us," as He commanded us to do, the effect can be enormous. The effect can fill a whole church. The effect can go on to fill a whole neighborhood. The effect can fill a whole city; it can even go on to affect a whole world. It can even go out to affect the lives of the poor who Judas seemed so concerned about! Though such acts of love and devotion and gratitude may start in a personal, private way, like a beautiful fragrance, it gently begins to spread, to grow, and to transform the way things are (*I considered and discarded a few titles for this sermon; one was "Let's Raise a Stink for Jesus."*)

*"The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."* It affected everyone in that place with a lingering fragrance, and as mentioned earlier, I believe that fragrance sweetly affected Jesus, as the lingering aroma of love and devotion and gratitude helped carry Him through the traumatic events necessary to secure our salvation. In fact, I'm willing to bet Jesus came out of the tomb that first Easter morning with traces of the fragrance of nard still clinging to him, this pleasing fragrance of a grateful woman's devotion.

Probably one of the things I love most about Easter is the fragrance. On Sunday this sanctuary will be filled with the fragrance of Easter lilies and spring flowers, the fragrance of life, the fragrance that reminds us the hope of life springing eternal. Fragrance that reminds us the Messiah has indeed fought the fight and won the battle; the fragrant aroma of life that overcomes the flagrant stench of death. Fittingly, the flowers are also memorials to those who have already experienced their resurrection. The fragrance reminds us of Christ who loved us and "... gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and pleasing sacrifice to God." A fragrance that calls us, too, to gratefully offer our lives as a fragrant offering, pleasing to God.