

The Scent of Mercy
Menno Mennonite Church
December 15, 2019
Christmas through the Senses; Advent 2019

Purpose: To connect the workings of God with us with the radical acceptance of God.

Message: God embrace all of us, no matter the scent, and welcomes us home.

Scripture: John 12:1-8 (I will read); Isaiah 9:2(b)-7 [Please read/have read, picking up with *The people who have walked in Darkness...*]

Synopsis: Scent is quite hard to lose. Almost more quickly than anything else, it can trigger memory of time, place, setting. It can be hard to shake, rendering once pleasure filled moments untenable because of the smell (or more to the point, the memory it triggers) overpowers us. Long after the skunk has sprayed, the experience lingers, leaving us that much more shy. And if we think that we stink, there is almost nothing that can make us move toward other people, choosing to do almost anything than to inflict discomfort on others, embarrassing ourselves. Yet Jesus embraces us for who we are, where we are. It is easy to forget the complex aromas of the Christmas scene—not just the stuff of ease and comfort but also of challenge. Even Myhre and frankincense are burial spices. God in Christ shows us time and again a willingness to enter into the way of the world, regardless of smell and walk with us now and always.

12 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."

<https://www.evernote.com/l/APli83Gx0FIP0oIIg4B201AOgwRj8tstmEg/>

<https://www.evernote.com/l/APmzCzhFg-lIpI19DCCciAhBnWHF-TSa8lw/>

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Smell is personal. Not just “do I smell OK enough to be generally non-offensive” fashion but is interwoven like few other things can. The right scent can trigger a connection that can lead us down memory lane like no other. For me, strong chlorine takes me right back to my childhood and swimming lessons taught within the “jump in the deep end and see what happens” method of learning how to swim. Cookies wafting through the house can take us to times long ago with friends and family in attendance. The tang of salt in the air can speak of fun memories and summer days at the beach, just as much as antiseptic can transport us into hospital rooms and moments of great beauty and great pain. Of all the sensory inputs in the world, scent has one of the highest rates of stimulation in brain scans relative to other cues trying to depict the same thing. I know that there are people who avoid whole ranges of products because their smells trigger too strong a reaction for them, transporting them through time, space, and memory in ways other inputs, sights and sounds, simply do not. If you think of a particularly poignant moment of your recollection, I am guessing there is a smell scape to go with it to nuance the experience of the moment.

All of this is true because, basically, life stinks. Literally. The world around us is full of scent and we are keyed to it. Fair or foul, sweet or sinister our world is shaped largely at the end of our noses. While we may not be nearly as keen smellers as some animals, we get a lot of information through our noses. Emily has reported developing an increased sense of the rotten since the kids have arrived, and, let’s face it—there is a survival skill that goes with the territory. The smell of our food determines whether we will actually eat something; a skill I got rather good at in bachelor life, I must admit. Our noses are often our first line of defense, alerting us to the dangers of the world at lightning speed. And of course, when it all gets too much, there is nothing quite to clear the room like a snoot full of the wrong scent. Most religions including Christianity use incense to interact with the gods because the wafting of scent was sure to intrigue the deity going by. There is even evidence that scent is linked to genetics, changing what, and more so, who smells good to us when and how.

Yet when we come to the Bible, we don’t take a great deal of time reading with our noses on high alert. It’s not really our thing. It is hard to imagine the way things smelled way back when, and by in large, do we really want to consider the way the world was that far before the days of regular personal hygiene and perfumes? I am guessing not. It takes some deliberate consideration of exactly how far we might go to accurately invite ourselves into the smell of

Christmas, the smell of the stable, the smell of an overcrowded city full of travelers. How far might we go in the name of incarnational experience. I mean really, things could get messy if we are not careful here. But think about it for a moment. What would reading the text with an imagination of the smell involved do to connect you in new ways to the story? We all know the stories; we all know the smells—often better than we would wish. What would change if we would allow ourselves to imagine the scents of salvation, the good and the bad? It could take us interesting places. It might make the world and the incarnation that much more real.

This story of Jesus' feet being anointed appears in all four Gospels each with its particular twist in the telling. The place, the timeline, the scenario, those present all change from story to story. But the action and its meaning does not—Jesus is honored and the death is foreshadowed, forgiveness is extended. I chose John's telling because it is the version that speaks most clearly to the smell of the thing—filling the whole house with the smell of perfume meant for the preparation of the body for burial. In John's telling, Mary of Mary and Martha fame has received her brother Lazarus back from the dead, the very brother who was sitting at table with Jesus that the sisters were worried about the stone because the body had begun to smell. Perhaps this jar of perfume was intended for the beloved brother that they were going to bury, now applied to the one who had raised Lazarus on his way to his own grave. Tending to this need of the body and decay was tending to the very incarnate sense of the body, of embracing what is, and anticipating what was about to be. It was an act of rich embrace which stunned and scandalized the gathered crowd; Judas just happens to be the one who speaks their confusion into words. And I dare it might even be a question a good Mennonite might find themselves asking—might there be something just as good, but half a cheap? Sometimes we can miss the point of what is right in front of us.

I grew up around poultry farmers, and with a poultry processor 10 miles down the road (back in a geography where 10 miles actually is thought to be significant distance). One of the things that we got to do as a church youth fundraising event together was to be hired on to go help the farmers empty the cages of the grown chickens being sent on to market. They would hire several church groups over the course of the week to come and catch chickens. We would have to get up at 4:00 in the morning—I always thought to sneak up on sleeping chickens—which never worked after the first one was roused making a fuss—and go up and down the aisle transferring chickens by the handful from pen to rolling cage to be carted off to the processor to

become meat. It was a marvelously dirty, stinky, dusty job. No matter how well you geared up, you are sure to be scratched, dusted, and general bedraggled by the end of the couple of hours we were at it. We were not allowed to get into the car with our work clothes on lest we stank up the upholstery and had to go shower immediately upon arriving home. Yet, no matter how well or how long you stood underneath the water, there was a sense that you never were really rid of that smell in any real way at any rate. We just couldn't get clean enough. It would take days for the perceived scent to leave your nostrils.

I think that we operate in a very similar way when it comes to forgiveness. I think the forgiveness that we are most stingy with is the forgiveness we extend to our own selves. As much as we must and should seek forgiveness from those who we have done wrong, we should also, having achieved forgiveness from others, embrace that forgiveness for ourselves too. Yet often the hardest thing to do is to shake the smell out of our own noses of our own lives as we know them. It is one thing to accept that someone else has done wrong to you and you are in a position to forgive them for it at the right time perhaps. But understanding ourselves as forgiven, fully and finally, often takes some doing and proves the most difficult forgiveness that we can muster. We strongly suspect that there is that in our lives that just does not smell right, and there is no way to shed that scent. We assume the God is a whole lot like us; he forgives, but in the mechanistic of ways. There are words to be said, oaths to be honored and prayers to be made to set up the conditions for God to consider our pardon. We know what we would expect of someone who has done something bad, and we strongly suspect that God does the same thing. Our expectations of God is that God feels as bad about ourselves as we do, and can never accept us as we are. That God can always smell the reality of the matter on us.

But that is where we need the downright earthiness of the incarnation to set us right. From day one, God comes to be with us in the in-ideal circumstances of our world. God knows it smells. God comes in the midst of the smelly, overpowering reality of the world and is with us, near to us, and present with us in it all. We may well smell of where we have been and what we have done, but God like the father in the prodigal son embraces us, stink and all, and lets us know that we are forgiven, that we are loved, that we are welcomed. God does not judge us the way we judge ourselves; thanks be to God. This is good news indeed. We are accepted, no matter how we smell.

Does that mean we need not change, that somehow God's unconditional acceptance lets us continue in our own stink? No it does not. Forgiveness and embracing a full life are two different tasks, and two different things, just like forgiveness and consequences are. We can be forgiven and still face consequences for where we have been, and what has transpired. But it does mean that God cannot be kept out just because we think the place stinks, and that God could never come in and tolerate the smell. God comes in and sits with us as we are for who we are.

The late writer and theologian Rachel Held Evans who died over the summer reflected on the Sandy Hook shootings, now 7 years and way too many shootings in the past as of this week. She was trying to make sense of this horror in the context of advent, and how some are given to think that such events have their roots in an absence of God. She disagrees and writes "If the incarnation teaches us anything, it's that God can be found everywhere: in a cattle trough, on a throne, among the poor, with the sick, on a donkey, in a fishing boat, with the junkie, with the prostitute, with the hypocrite, with the forgotten, in places of power, in places of oppression, in poverty, in wealth, where God's name is known, where it is unknown, with our friends, with our enemies, in our convictions, in our doubts, in life, in death, at the table, on the cross, and in every kindergarten classroom from Sandy Hook to Shanghai. God cannot be kept out."¹

That is what Emmanuel means. That God is with us, no matter how stinky it might get along the way. God comes and is with us, around us and sits next to us. We freshen up in response to God, not to bring God close, but to respond to God's love, and to point others to the way of the Lord. We can only do this if we can only get the smell of our world as we see them out of our own noses.

May the sweet smell of God's grace overpower us time and again each and every season.

¹ Evans, Rachel *God Can't be Kept out* Blog December 17, 2012 <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/god-kept-out>