

Smells. When I mention the word “smells” where does your mind take you? What smells? What do these smells remind you of?

I grew up on a dairy farm so smells were always a big part of my life as a child and youth. I went to high school directly across the street from my father’s dairy farm. I would walk to school at times and after arriving at school my classmates would ask me how I could possibly stand the smell of the farm that day. I would look dumbfounded because I couldn’t smell anything unusual. The smell that was so strong to others was a smell that was overlooked by me. My mom always told me that the smell of manure was the smell of success.

I do remember the summer after I graduated high school and before I went off to college. The high school classes started before I left for college so I continued to work on my Daddy’s farm while students returned to class across the street from the farm. My job on one particular day was to use the manure spreader to spread manure in the pasture that was right next to the school. I will say that it brought me great pleasure to know that I was sharing bovine smells with my former teachers and that I was not around for them to complain to.

I also remember the occasion when I was a student at Clemson and I had been out to the dairy barn for a class that day. Yes, I was a dairy science major at Clemson if you were not aware. I left the barn in the dairy pickup truck and went by the sorority dorm to visit with my girlfriend Kathryn Durham. You can just imagine what a dairy barn pickup truck looked and smelled like. Yes, we really did have those at Clemson.

As I drove up to the sorority dorm in the manure stained truck and met the eyes of my future wife, Kathryn made it quite clear to me that I needed to keep moving. The smell of a dairy barn was not a smell she was going to claim for herself.

Maybe the smell of cow manure is not an important smell in your life unless your name is Bob Clinton. But all of us have smells that are important to us. The smell of our mother’s perfume or our Dad’s deodorant. The smell of freshly cut grass as you and your teammates head out for practice.

The smell of cookies in the kitchen as you walk into the house. The smell of your horse as you walk up to the barn. The smell of the chemical plant as you drive into your hometown. The smell of exhaust at a Nascar race. Certain smells as they hit our nose cause our brain to go to a certain place.

In the story that we are about to read, smell plays an important part. This story actually covers two chapters in the Bible. Chapter 11 and 12 are a transition in the gospel of John. We will be exposed today to the 7th and final miracle that the gospel of John writes about that Jesus performed. 7 is a good biblical number of completeness. Chapter 11 and 12 is the transition time when the religious authorities begin to plot the death of Jesus and the final events of Jesus' life unfold.

In chapter 11 of John, we are introduced to Lazarus. Lazarus is the brother of Mary and Martha. Jesus gets word that Lazarus is ill and that Mary and Martha want Jesus to come and visit him and bring him healing. Jesus is told, however, that Lazarus lives in a very dangerous place. In Bethany, where Lazarus lives, there are several people there that want to kill Jesus. But even though it is dangerous for him, Jesus decides to go and visit Lazarus anyway.

However, before Jesus can arrive, Lazarus dies. When Jesus finally arrives, Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. But being dead for 4 days does not stop Jesus. He arrives at the tomb and calls out to Lazarus to come out of the tomb. Lazarus comes out of the tomb and is brought back to life.

The religious leaders are threatened by all of this. The religious council called the Sanhedrin is assembled and they begin to plot how Jesus is to be killed. It is in the midst of all of this tension that we move into the next part of the story that we read this morning.

Read John 12:1-11

Jesus returns to the place where the religious leaders want him arrested and killed. As he arrives in Bethany he finds a party going on. A party for Lazarus who had been raised from the dead. But as Jesus arrives at this party Mary does something which was socially unacceptable. Mary breaks open a box of perfume costing thousands and thousands of dollars and anoints the feet of Jesus with her hair.

Kings were anointed on their heads. Dead people had their feet anointed. Mary anoints the feet of Jesus. Women were also not allowed to touch men. And touching a man with her hair was seen as a sexually suggestive act. But Jesus does not brush her away. Instead he welcomes her act of anointing.

The smell of this perfume permeates throughout the house. This smell reminds everyone of this act of service. So that whenever they smelled perfume like this they would be reminded of the lifesaving Jesus and the people that were thankful for him.

But this perfume smell did not impress everyone. Judas, the one who would later betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, asks why Mary would be so wasteful. He says that she could have sold the perfume and given the money to the poor. But Judas cares nothing about the poor. Whereas Mary busts open a box of perfume and generously gives her all to Jesus, Judas is the one who will hold tight to a bag of silver as he carries out a plot to have Jesus arrested.

So the question for us this morning becomes this. Which character in this story are we? Are we like Judas in the story who is more concerned about holding on to our possessions and keeping them to ourselves? Are we the one who is more concerned with protecting our reputation and our money? Are we the one more concerned with judging the actions of others than in serving others?

Or are we Mary in this story? Are we the one who is willing to sacrifice everything we have to serve God and show our gratitude to God?

In the movie, *Babette's Feast*, 2 Protestant sisters are courted in their young adult years by two men, one of whom is named Papin who is a talented opera star from Paris. But their father discourages marriage and the women eventually decide to return home to their small village to tend to their father. Their father eventually dies but the two women remain in their isolated community in Denmark caring for their aging community of white haired people.

One day there is a knock on their door of the sisters and standing at the door is Babette. Babette is a middle aged woman who is a refugee from Paris. Babette asks the sisters if she can live there and cook for them as her rent. The sisters reluctantly take her in and she begins to work for them as a housekeeper and cook.

The entire town is economically depressed and Babette cooks meals for the entire community. The meals she cooks are very simple and very bland.

But Babette is in possession of a lottery ticket and she discovers that her lottery ticket has been chosen and she has won 10,000 francs. She decides to host a very fancy meal for the entire community and especially for these 2 women who had cared for her for all of these years.

In this meal, there is more than food shared. Old grievances are overcome and new relationships are kindled. Hope begins to be restored in the community by this generous act of cooking a very elaborate and expensive meal for the entire town consisting of aging, white haired Protestants.

After the meal is finished, the sisters assume that Babette will now return to Paris with her remaining money. This is what happens after the meal as the sisters discover that Babette is not returning to Paris. The movie is in Danish with English subtitles.

Show movie clip from “Babette’s Feast.”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgO9v_7DaB4

So which character are we in this story of Lazarus, Mary, and Judas? Are we Judas who is more concerned with holding on to what we have scared about tomorrow? A person more concerned with holding onto the bag of money that we have been given? A person who is more interested in judging others than helping others? A person driven to bring others down?

Or are we like Mary who is willing to give her all to show Jesus that she loves and trusts him? Are we like Mary who is willing to bust open the box and let the smells of the perfume radiate throughout the room so that everyone is touched by your generosity?

Both Judas and Mary are remembered for their acts. The smell of the perfume reminds us of them. So which way of life do you want people to remember you by? The one who judges or the one who was generous?

The one who turned away from Jesus or the one who poured out thanksgiving onto Jesus? AMEN.

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-Given: March 13, 2016 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)