

Isaiah 43:16-21
Psalm 126
Philippians 3:8-14
John 12:1-8

Sermon for April 2, 2022

THE EXTRAVAGANCE OF GOD'S LOVE
By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: For God so loved the world.

We've talked about the phenomenon of memory on a number of occasions from the pulpit...at least I think we have. In any event, on at least one of those occasions, I may have offered the illustration I'm about to give now. I honestly can't remember. But if I have, please forgive and bear with me until we make it relate to our gospel reading for this morning.

This happened to me sometime back when I was grocery shopping at Tops. As usual, I was carrying my little orange basket up and down the aisles while holding the shopping list in my other hand. At a certain point, I turned from the back of the store where the processed meats are displayed into one of the aisles, and I had only taken a couple of steps when I was aware of an extremely strong smell of unwashed human flesh in the aisle, so strong that it literally made me wrinkle my nose. But there was nobody in the aisle, so out of curiosity I turned and stepped back into the main aisle to see if I could get a look at whatever had been the source of this really pungent, nose-wrinkling aroma.

But as I turned and took those quick steps, two thoughts struck me, one right after the other. The first was that it was a familiar smell. And then immediately after that, like a giant wave of memory that I had just plunged into, I realized that it smelled like my grandparents.

My grandparents, at least when I was a little boy, lived on a farm with no running water. You got water indoors by pumping it into a bowl in the sink, and there was no shower or bathtub. Cleaning up was therefore pretty much limited to washing

your hands and face, clothing was worn day after day after day of hard work, and needless to say, there was no deodorant.

Nevertheless, at no time on the many occasions when I visited them as a boy on their farm had I ever been aware that they had a strong odor, nor during the sixty-plus years since that time had I ever once thought of how my grandparents used to smell.

And yet that day in Tops, the memory of that smell and its association with my grandparents just overwhelmed me, to the extent that I broke out laughing like an idiot at the sheer strangeness of what had just happened.

We're all familiar with this phenomenon, aren't we? But that doesn't make it any less mysterious that our sense of smell is somehow more intimately linked with our memory than any of our other four senses. I'm sure the evolutionary biologists could manufacture some ludicrous but scientific sounding flabber-jabber for why this might be so; but I prefer the much more straightforward explanation that it is one of God's sweetest and most whimsical gifts to us, his children.

The reason I'm going on about this this morning is because of something that has always stood out for me in the passage from John that we read this morning, about the lovely incident in which Mary cleans the feet of Jesus with expensive perfume. Matthew, Mark and Luke all have versions of this same episode in their gospels, but only in John's gospel do we hear of this one detail, in verse 3:

And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil.

That's a detail that it would only occur to provide to someone who had been there on the occasion, and now, writing his gospel some sixty-plus years later, it's the memory of that aroma that fills John's mind, just as the sixty-plus year-old memory of my grandparents and their world filled my mind that day in Tops.

There is never anything accidental or incidental in John's gospel; every detail is included for a reason. And I think the reason he included this detail in his account is that he wanted to stress the importance of memory to the life of the church of Christ: just as the aroma of her perfume filled that house that day, so the memory of what she did will filled the entire house of Christ forevermore.

And what did she do – or rather, what was there about what she did – that John wanted the church to remember, and not just to remember, but to be filled with, to be overwhelmed with, to be flooded with, forevermore?

Because the roads in Israel were unpaved, and therefore often either muddy or dusty, and because people wore crude sandals – usually just a strip of leather with a strap – it was the custom of the time when a host invited guests to dinner that the host would provide a wash basin filled with water for the guests to bathe their feet before they reclined at table. It was commonly a practice as well for the host to put a drop or two of perfume into the basin to help the feet smell good.

But that's not what Mary did on the occasion when Jesus came to dine with her sister and her and their brother Lazarus. She didn't just add a drop or two into the wash basin; she poured her entire container of nard, a very precious perfume and undoubtedly the most valuable thing she owned into the basin to wash and perfume the feet of Jesus!

And that was what Judas objected to: not the act itself, but the extraordinary extravagance of the act.

And it was clearly the extravagance of Mary's act of love that John wanted to link with the church's memory by invoking the image of the aroma of the perfume spreading throughout the whole house. In the accounts of the episode that we find in both Matthew and Mark, Jesus in fact makes explicit that what this woman has done should be remembered forever, but I like the way John has incorporated that memory of the aroma of the perfume to make the same point even better.

Throughout the OT, the image of a sweet aroma rising to God from sacrifices made to him is used because of the association of aroma with memory. The aroma of the sacrifices is sweet to God because it reminds him of the love he has always had for his chosen people.

And I think that's exactly the use of this particular and deeply poignant personal memory that John is making in his gospel. What John is saying is that the church must always remember – must always be filled with the memory – of this woman's extravagant love on that occasion a few days before Christ's crucifixion. It was a love that gave no thought to herself, that sacrificed the very best she had, that didn't care what the world thought. That's the love that John wants the church to remember.

And why? So that we can admire and perhaps even become sentimental about this especially generous and grateful and devoted admirer of Jesus, this lovely woman named Mary who lived two thousand years ago? Is it perhaps to encourage us to become just as self-sacrificial in our service to Jesus now as she was then?

All those things are possible, and of all the people who make appearances in our gospel accounts of our Lord's life, this particular woman may be the one I like and admire the most.

But without diminishing the enormous reverence this particular woman merited because of what she did that afternoon so long ago, I think John was pointing to something else, when he included his memory of the beautiful aroma of what she did filling the house.

I think what John was teaching us was that what Mary did should always remind us of what God, through his Son, did for us. He gave the very best he had, for us. And he did it, without any qualifications, without any conditions.

As Mary stooped down to wash his feet, Jesus stooped down to wipe the feet of all of us.

As Mary didn't care what anybody thought, God speaks in private to every one of us.

As Mary gave the very best she had, God gave his very best for us.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son...

And so our prayer for today, heavenly Father, is that you keep us mindful of the sweet aroma that fills all of heaven whenever we remember your Son, the price he paid for us, the gift he gave to us, and Your own extravagant love that he shared with us, as we pray in His name.