

Jesus and Expensive Perfume Smell
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20:45

Let us pray. Holy One, guide our thoughts, so that they may align with Yours. Guide our hearts, so that they may break along with Yours, and be emboldened to love without abandon. And guide our spirits, that we may hear your Word among the words spoken this day. It is in Your Name we pray, Amen.

I've spoken here in the past about how much I love to cook and bake. It's a particular joy of mine. I grew up with a mom who also spent a lot of time in the kitchen, so instead of Chips Ahoy and Hamburger Helper, I grew up on homemade cookies and made-from-scratch dinners almost without exception. When we first met, my husband was amazed that I had never tried Kraft Mac and Cheese; he made it for me early in our relationship, and every so often, I indulge his odd preference to it, over my (far superior) roux-based homemade version. Running around after two little ones has somewhat dimmed my cooking passions—the focus now is just getting the darn food on the table— but I still make dinner nearly every night, and it's usually something I have created myself.

In the first year of our marriage, though, I was just beginning my life as a cook, so I periodically would try to push the envelope on what I thought I could do, often with varying success. One evening, I got in my head that I wanted to make fried chicken. The tried-and-true Betty Crocker cookbook had labeled it "EASY," so I thought, "Great! I can do easy." I made the simple batter, and prepared myself for that crispy, juicy, satisfying taste. Trouble was, in retrospect, I had absolutely NO idea what the heck I was doing when it came to frying. I had no idea, for example, that all oil is not created equal in the frying world. Worse still, I had no thermometer, and no idea at the time about the requisite oil temp for frying. Surely, if I just heated the stuff in a pan, it would be perfect, right? So I watched, dismayed, as the batter sopped up all the oil, then fell off the chicken. I cranked up the heat, and then found myself peppered with out-of-control hot oil spray, burning every exposed surface of skin I had, and covering every exposed surface in general within a five-foot radius. The wrong pan, the wrong oil, the wrong temp. It was a disaster. By the end, I actually had gotten the hang of it, sort of, and the final product didn't taste half bad. But long after the taste of the dinner had left our mouths, we were left with... the smell. Oh my goodness, the smell. I remember that I was on-call that night at the hospital where I worked at the time, and when I arrived to relieve my colleague, hours later, she said to me, "Geez, did you work in McDonalds today or something? You smell like oil." And our kitchen at the time, in addition to being extraordinarily small, was also very poorly ventilated. The place reeked of fried...whatever for a solid week thereafter. And every so often, when I catch a whiff of fried chicken, I'm taken right back to that ill-conceived dinner in that little kitchen.

In a way, my ability to return to this memory as though it were yesterday shouldn't be surprising. You may know that, of the five senses, the sense of smell is the one that is most associated with memory. How many of you can immediately remember the smell of, say, a parent? Perhaps your father's sweat after working out, or your mother's perfume? I know I can. It's distinctive and unique; every time my nose is triggered by a similar scent, I'm carried immediately back to being a young child. How about the smell of a favorite dinner in the oven, as you walk in the door? The smell of your favorite coffee or tea? Some smells are better than others, yes? I can recall the exact moment I stepped foot in India—the smell was overpowering. I visited a family friend's pig farm when I was 10. I can still conjure that smell in my memory, and when I took a church youth group to a pig farm back in 2011—please, don't ask the details of that one—I kept looking over my shoulder, half-expecting to see my father's

friends working in the mud. I used to visit a woman in the hospital who loved fresh popcorn: turns out, she loved going to the movies in her younger days, and you would not believe how her eyes lit up when I brought her a bag one time—she didn't want to eat any of it, but the smell led us into an unbelievable conversation about times gone by. I could go on and on here; we all have smells that conjure up distinctive memories.

Memory and smell are deeply connected in the inner reaches of our brains. And that thought struck me as I was exploring this week's Gospel text in anticipation of this morning. A week before the Passover, and a day before Jesus rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he is having dinner with Mary and Martha, at the home of their brother Lazarus, whom he has just raised from the dead. Mary takes it upon herself to pour a pound of perfume over Jesus' feet, and wipe the perfume with her hair. In case the readers are likely to miss this little tidbit, the writer of John goes on to say that "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." Uh yeah, no kidding. A pound of perfume is, to put it mildly, a serious amount of perfume. Furthermore, the size of Lazarus' house was probably tinier than the kitchen in which my fried chicken disaster took place. This place would have reeked of the stuff. With this in mind, it puts Judas' objection in a pretty reasonable light. "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" Three hundred denarii, by the way, is equivalent to a year's wages. So imagine spending a year's wages on a bottle of perfume, then dumping it out. It also bears mentioning that it was a woman who did this; it was verboten for women to touch men at that time, and hair worn down, as Mary must have done to have wiped Jesus' feet, was a sign of overt sexuality. This act, even apart from the perfume, would have been considered extremely forward and extremely inappropriate. Judas calls her out with a seemingly innocuous question: "Why was this money wasted in this way? Why not give it to the poor?"

Jesus, however, is not fooled. He, forgive the pun, smells a rat, and the gospel writer lets us in on the truth. Judas couldn't have cared less about the poor; he was hoping to pocket the money himself. Regardless of whether Jesus knows this or not, he puts Judas in his place: "Leave her alone. She bought it 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." Again, he was trying to warn the disciples of what Mary alone seemed to be aware of— that his death was imminent.

Two brief thoughts to leave you with this morning. The first hearkens back to our olfactory observations from earlier. As you can probably guess, the culture in which Jesus lived was not one that placed a high value on personal hygiene. This was the desert; water was scarce, and certainly not wasted on daily bathing. So imagine that perfume smell. And imagine that perfume smell Not. Going. Anywhere. Scholars have hypothesized that that smell would have stuck around for some time, both in that house, on Jesus, and perhaps on the others in attendance at the dinner. Jesus would have smelled that perfume when walking in to Jerusalem, palm branches spreading around the tell-tale aroma. He would have smelled it as he shared his last lessons with the disciples. He would have drunk in its scent as he washed the disciples' feet. It would have perfumed the bread at the Last Supper. He would have caught a whiff of it with every lash of the whip, every soldier's blow, and as the nails were driven into his hands and feet. It may have been the very last thing he was aware of, that smell of perfume mixed with the salt of his tears and blood. And every time he smelled it, he would have been brought back to the moment of Mary's sacrifice, pouring a year's worth of wages upon him, wiping his feet with her hair. Perhaps, in the agony suffered on the cross, Jesus would have had some passing memory of the love one of his friends had for him. In this grand, extravagant act, what a gift Mary gave to Jesus: in the midst of so much hate, to be reminded, however fleetingly, that love is still there.

One more thought. What gift of love can we give today? The temptation is to be like Judas, who not only took money, but felt compelled to make himself out to be a philanthropic saint when he was really anything but. There are many today who are tempted to appear more

fiscally generous than they really are; this is an age-old temptation. There are many who are guilted into giving something, rather than giving freely, out of their hearts, as Mary has done. But just talking about giving money to worthy causes is an unnecessarily limited reading of this passage; money is sort of a red herring here. Mary gives her money, yes. But she gives more. She gives her spirit. She throws all manner of propriety and manners and caution to the heavily-perfumed wind. She does a very radical thing. And why does she do this? Mary gives it all to Jesus because she knows time is short. She gives him something powerful, and just as the smell stays, the memory of it lingers even today. How many opportunities do we miss to give of ourselves? This past Tuesday, the day I wrote this sermon, it was percolating in my head, as I like to allow Scriptures and sermon ideas to do before I begin to write. My older son Zack interrupted my reverie: he wanted to watch Charlotte's Web. Again. This has been a particular favorite of his lately; I know every word and every song by heart. Truth be told, I was aching to sit down in front of my computer to write while the ideas were flowing. But, sighing inwardly, I sat down on the couch with the son, and watched Charlotte's Web. Again. Because that cuddle time is precious, and so short. I have no idea if watching a movie with his mom will linger in my son's memory, but I'd rather the possibility that it will, as opposed to the memory of mommy being too busy to relax with him. And the physical memory of my arm around him certainly has stayed with me. Friends, I encourage you with the same challenge that I pose to myself: may we all find ways to give ourselves over to love. Time and again. In whatever way God may be calling you to right now. Perhaps the call is simply to slow down. Or put the phone down. Or listen a bit more. Whatever it may be for you, it will pave the way for Holy Week, bringing us closer to the cross, the ultimate symbol of sacrificial love. However we choose to spread love, its impact will linger, and even grow, wherever we leave its unmistakable scent. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.