

We Are Fragile *John 12: 1-8*

The Sense of smell

As you know, Juhee and I had Covid-19 a few months ago and we experienced all the symptoms such as a high fever, headache, body aches, chills, and the loss of smell and taste. One of you prepared a delicious chicken soup for us. The funny thing was, that because Juhee and I had lost the sense of taste and smell, we thought it was fish soup because the texture was so soft and we couldn't smell difference. Having Covid was not fun, but two good things about losing our sense of smell was that I couldn't sense my dog's funny smell and Juhee didn't ask me to take a shower.

While we don't often recognize it, the sense of smell has an important role in our lives. According to scientists, smells have a stronger link to memory and emotion than any of the other senses. So "different scents can change your mood, transport you back to a distant memory, and may even help you bond with loved ones."¹ [ppt] I bet most of you don't like the smell of mold. When you smell it, what comes to mind? For me, it's a prayer room in the basement of my home church. Whenever I entered that prayer room, I could smell the mold and I kind of liked it. So for me, the smell of mold brings back memories of that dark and damp prayer room. Whenever I smell burning wood, it brings me back to a campfire at a youth retreat meeting and the hot sweet potato I ate during the campfire. Smell and memory are closely linked.

The Fragrance of the Perfume...

Fragrance plays a key role in today's bible story. Six days before Passover, Jesus and his disciples entered Lazarus' house for dinner. Martha was busy preparing and serving food. Freshly baked barley bread was on the table and the warm, hearty aroma filled the air. The room was full of the ambrosial smell of roasted lamb rubbed with garlic, rosemary, thyme and of course, red wine. The house was filled with delightful smells of Mediterranean cuisine and the joyous noise of people, chattering and laughing.

Then, "Mary came in with a jar of very expensive aromatic oils, anointed Jesus' feet, and then wiped them with her hair. The fragrance of the oils filled the house." The fragrance of the perfume made of pure nard was so powerful it overwhelmed the other scents as well as the noise in the room. Can you guess what memory this scent of perfume might bring back to the people gathered?

Where did this event take place? In the house of Lazarus at Bethany. Who is Lazarus? Lazarus is the man Jesus raised from the dead only a few days prior. According to the custom of the day, when a person died, the body was often anointed with oils and wrapped with aromatic herbs. The pure nard oil in that room on this day, although fragrant might have reminded people of something not so pleasant. It likely brought back the painful memory of the death of Lazarus. People may have wanted to ignore that and just have a jolly dinner, but the strong fragrance kept them from running away. Judas Iscariot tried to change the subject, saying "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" But Jesus said, "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." Jesus spoke the words no one wanted

¹ <https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2016/08/what-your-nose-knows>

to hear. “I am not always going to be around.” Jesus wanted his disciples to face the hard truth that he, too, would die.

We Are Fragile

We don’t want to talk about the D-word, especially at the dinner table. According to a survey, “almost half of people aged 40-64 don’t feel comfortable talking to their parents about death.”² A third of them say that they much prefer talking about their weight than death. Talking about death is difficult because it is a very emotive topic that can make people too afraid, or too angry, or too frantic to keep talking. This is the same for the church.

When I was first appointed to my previous church, one of my clergy friends advised me that “you’d better practice how to lead a funeral before you go to that church.” I didn’t know what he meant at that time, but I soon understood. The church had an elderly congregation and I had to lead eight funerals during my first year. One church member asked me if I could lead a bible study about Christian understanding of dying and death to help church members prepare. She gave me resources and educational material for hospice patients and families. But I couldn’t do it because I was a little afraid of dealing with this sensitive topic. Also, I was not sure if I could really talk about death with my elderly congregation members while being young and healthy. I was uncomfortable talking about death, but death comes to us all whether we like it or not.

One reason we feel uncomfortable talking about death is that death reminds us of the fragility of life. Sense of the fragility of life is never more present than when death is called to mind. We are fragile. Our time is limited and our lives are vulnerable to the diverse forces of life. Life can be shattered at any time. Remember the pandemic. We have heard many tragic stories of people whose lives were cut short by the virus. The earthquake in Turkey. War in Ukraine, unexpected car accidents, mass-shooting, illness... Life is fragile. It’s difficult to face the vulnerability in ourselves and the fragility of life. So we often ignore it and pretend we will be o.k. if we work hard enough. But what would happen if we stopped denying the limited nature of our lives and breathed in deeply the fragrance of vulnerability? What if we faced and accepted the fragility of life as it is?

Our daily devotional book, “Good Enough” is written by Dr. Kate Bowler. Do you like this book? I like it because her writing is so human, acknowledging life as both hard and beautiful. She reminds us that we will never be perfect, but we are still good enough as we are. I didn’t really know how she had come to this realistic yet optimistic and beautiful understanding of life until I read that she was diagnosed with a Stage 4 cancer in her mid-thirties. She faced the fragility of life first hand. Through her struggle she developed a beautiful understanding of life that inspires and helps many people.

We are fragile. But that’s o.k. Facing the fragility of life as an inevitable part of being human, we can honestly accept our imperfection and become less harsh on ourselves and others. As we accept the limited nature of our life, we can see what is really important and how precious the present moment is. To know and accept our vulnerability to uncontrollable and unpredictable forces of life, we can be more compassionate toward those who are hurting and suffer together with them. And as we accept the fragility of life, we can honestly grieve our losses without losing hope.

² <https://www.independentage.org/we-need-to-talk-about-death/talking-about-death/why-you-should-never-be-too-polite-to-talk-about-death>

Mary, Loving, Grieving and Honoring Jesus

Before Mary of Bethany anointed Jesus with costly perfume for the day of his burial, Jesus had already told his disciples about his suffering and death at least three times, but his male disciples didn't listen or didn't want to listen. According to the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus first told his disciples about his death, Peter rebuked Jesus saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." He tried to ignore it and pretend he was in control. What did he do when Jesus was crucified? He fled.

Unlike the male disciples, Mary was the only disciple who acknowledged and accepted Jesus' suffering and death for all. She accepted the vulnerability that there was nothing she could do about what was going to happen. Instead of rejecting or ignoring the death of Jesus, she chose to embrace her vulnerability and live fully in that moment. Out of her extravagant love, she anointed Jesus with costly nard oil, which was used for king's funeral, and wiped his feet with her hair. By doing this, she honestly grieved for what was coming, the death of Jesus Christ, and at the same time, she witnessed to her faith in Christ as king and savior. Mary was fragile but the fragrance of love she shared was good enough to bring hope to all.

As Easter approaches, I know that Becky Arnold becomes busy ordering Easter flowers. Thank you Becky and Chancel guild members for this work! The Easter Lily is the traditional Easter flower. As we all know, a lily is delicate and fragile. But its fragrance and beauty can endure through even the toughest of storms. We are fragile but that's still good enough because we can still share the fragrance of love and hope with one another. During this Lenten season, pause for a moment and breathe in deeply the fragrance of our fragility and embrace it fully. That fragrance will bring us to the very memory of our savior. Amen.