

It Smells Like Death
The Rev. Amy Spagna
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John 12:1-8

An essential part of the experience of being human is having a sense of smell. It is impossible to escape that everything in our world has a smell to it – just ask your dog if you're not sure. Even space has a distinct odor. Some of the International Space Station crews have described it as being like burnt steak. Buzz Aldrin once said the lunar dust which clung to the suits of all the Apollo moonwalkers smelled "like burnt charcoal, or similar to the ashes that are in a fireplace, especially if you sprinkle a little water on them."¹ Back here on Earth, our sense of smell very often jogs our memories. Whether it's a pleasant odor like fresh bread baking or the church after it's been decorated for Christmas or Easter services, or a bad one like rotting food or a skunk, there's nearly always a time, place, or event attached to it. Regardless of whether they're pleasant or not, odors are a part of our embodied experience, and somehow, some way, we have to deal with them, whatever memory they bring back, whatever feeling they bring out, or whatever good or bad effects [they bring] on."²

Smells play a huge role in the gospel reading appointed for today. It starts with the pleasant smell of the dinner Martha is cooking and serving, and is quickly eclipsed by that of the expensive perfume bottle Mary breaks over Jesus' feet. Her actions are central to this scene. First, it negates any lingering stench from her brother Lazarus' death and revival just a few days previously. Second, it's the source of a complaint from

¹ "The Moon Smells: Apollo Astronauts Describe Lunar Aroma", <https://www.space.com/26932-moon-smell-apollo-lunar-aroma.html> [accessed April 11, 2019].

² Karoline Lewis, "Simultaneous Smells," <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4554> [accessed April 1, 2019].

Judas that the perfume has been wasted, when it could have been sold and the money used to help the poor. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it is a sign, one which foreshadows the events around Jesus' death just a few days later.

Signs, beginning with Jesus' miracle transformation of water into wine in Cana and ending with this broken container of perfume, are very important in the Gospel of John. They point the way from Jesus to God, as well as provide proof that he is who he says he is. The logic involved with them is pretty simple: see the signs, believe in Jesus, know God in all of God's glory. Mary has already done this. She definitely knows who he is. She probably also has a sense that something bad is brewing with the authorities where he is concerned. She takes full advantage of this last opportunity to provide a sign of her own, which Jesus recognizes right away: "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial" (Jn 12:7b, NRSV).

This is one of those stories which was so important within Jesus' ministry that all four gospels include a version of it. Matthew, Mark, and Luke decline to name the woman who anoints him at a dinner party given by Simon the Leper, who may well have been a neighbor of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany. Only Matthew offers any insight into the woman's identity at all by having Jesus explain that, "what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (Mt 26:13, NRSV). John, by comparison, is much more concerned with how the characters react to Mary's actions. His version "does not conclude with a profound statement of the anointer's action. Rather, it beckons readers... to heed the thoughts of Judas" about the perfume's proper use.³

³ Emerson Powery, "Commentary on John 12:1-8." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-john-121-8-5> [accessed March 28, 2022].

Instead of using the profits from its sale to benefit the poor, Mary has extravagantly poured it out, just as Jesus empties himself on humanity's behalf. The theological term for this is *kenosis*: the total emptying of himself on behalf of the world. It is not, as a couple of Anglican theologians suggested about 100 years ago, about leaving his humanity behind entirely. Nor is it, as the early Church argued over at length, whether his divine side has the capacity to suffer as much as his human side does. Rather, it's about giving up his own wishes in favor of God's wishes, emptying himself to the point of death. No matter which version of the story we read, all of them are clear that this self-emptying is the bottom line where Jesus is concerned. It's a bottom line which contains language around the overall salvation of the world, and clear instructions, in both words and actions, about what individuals are to do in response to him. Mary's actions here are but a small gesture against the cosmic backdrop of Jesus' life and death. They mattered to him, and not because of Judas' complaint that the perfume was wasted. They also weren't just a sign foreshadowing Jesus' impending demise. It was, to the two of them, a gesture made between friends who are so close they are practically family.

In a talk he gave to a group of newly ordained clergy some years after he retired, Archbishop Michael Ramsey framed the particular truth that the little things are supremely important, in this way:

"But consider: the glory of Christianity is its claim that small things really matter and that the small company, the very few, the one man, the one woman, the one child are of infinite worth to God. Consider our Lord himself. Amidst a vast world with its vast empires and vast events and tragedies our Lord devoted himself to

individual men and women, often giving hours and time to the very few or to the one man or woman. In a country where there were movements and causes which excited the allegiance of many – the Pharisees, the Zealots, the Essenes, and others – our Lord gives many hours to one woman of Samaria, one Nicodemus, one Martha, one Mary, one Lazarus, one Simon Peter, for the infinite worth of the one is the key to the Christian understanding of the many."⁴

Anyone who's ever broken a bottle of perfume knows it smells, very strongly and often unpleasantly. Such must have been the case when Mary used a whole pound of it to anoint Jesus' feet. Instead of the sweet smell of the flower from which nard is made, it becomes the very stench of death. It is the event which begins to turn us away from the penitent preparation of this long Lenten season, and toward the messiness of Jesus' last few days walking among us. When the moment comes for him to pour out all that he has, the price won't be 300 denarii. It will be his very life.

⁴ Michael Ramsey, *The Christian Priest Today* (reprint, Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 42.