

**Fifth Sunday in Lent**  
**Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish**  
**Saint Francisville, LA**  
**John 12:1-8**

- The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.
- Smell - we are uncomfortable with smell - culturally speaking - it has negative connotations, much more so than the other bodily senses.
- Think about the way we speak about it:
  - I might say, “this is really tasty” - which is good. But, “this is really smelly” would be bad.
  - And no one wants it said of them, “he smells” - but, many might appreciate a comment like, “she’s quite the looker”
- Smell is intrusive. Smell is intimate. It connects with something deep inside ourselves, It has the power to stir our memories, desires, and emotions in a way the other sense do not.<sup>1</sup>
- Smell has the ability to recall presence - “to bring us back” - being somewhere or with someone.
  - The smell of cloves and cinnamon and orange peel steaming in hot spiced wine - reminds me of winter, sitting with the family at Christmas time.
  - The stinging scent of chlorine - recalls hot summer days splashing around in the pool
  - A professor of mine tells a story of cleaning out his dad’s closet shortly after he passed away and picking up one of his shirts and smelling it - and saying, for a second, it was like he was there.
  - For some, the smell of incense is connected with liturgies in the church - being in the presence of the Divine.
- And the house was filled with the fragrance
- In today’s Gospel reading, what Mary did at the house in Bethany was a memorable event.
- In fact, in Mathew’s telling of the story - Jesus even says, “wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

- In the story, Passover is coming - it is only 6 days away - people from all over are making their way to Jerusalem for the celebration - Jesus is heading that way too, but he is coming for another purpose. He knows he will be betrayed - handed over to the religious authorities to be beaten and scourged - and to the Romans to be crucified. And yet still he goes - for our sake.
- Jesus and his disciples have stopped for the night in Bethany - just two miles outside of Jerusalem - at the home of Lazarus - whom he had just raised from the dead. Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, are there too. Martha is serving and Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet.
  - Note that this is the same Mary and Martha that we hear about in Luke - where Martha was distracted with preparations, worried and upset by many things - and got mad that Mary was just sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to him (and not helping her with the work).
- So, here too, Martha is serving - and Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus, doing something that upsets and offends an onlooker.
- She has a pound of costly perfume made of pure "nard" (a rare and exotic plant that grows in Himalayas of India and China) - worth 300 denarii - which would be roughly equivalent to a year's wages for a laborer at the time (so, think, 30 to 40 thousand dollars) - and what does she do with it? She pours it out onto the ground - on Jesus' feet - and then - flaunting taboos and decency - she lets down the tresses of her hair (which women in that society did not do in public) and uses it to wipe Jesus' feet (it was taboo for a woman to touch a man not her husband in that culture - and she was using her hair to wipe his feet!)
- What a sensual - sensory - sense stimulating - experience! A pound of perfume poured out. The fragrance filling the house. An extravagant, humbling, scandalous and beautiful act of devotion and love, regardless of the cost or of what other's might think.
- Judas cannot bear the intrusive display of devotion - its fragrance highlighting the stench of his impending betrayal - so, he criticizes. What a waste. The perfume should have been sold, the money given to the poor.
- He is like those whose thought is always pragmatic - utilitarian - looking for the point in things - what can we get from it? How can I use this to maximize gains, profits - or something good for myself (or, others)? How can this help me reach my goals?
- He cannot comprehend Mary's act - because there is no point, nothing to be gained, from her devotion - it is not a means to an end. Sitting at the feet of

Jesus is all she wants - being in his presence - humbling oneself while glorifying him *is* the goal. That's it. That's the end.

- It's an end that does not compute for Judas. Why would you do that? What do you get out of it?
- Judas likely joined the Jesus movement because he thought they were going to Jerusalem to toss out the Romans - get rid of the corrupt Religious Leaders and collaborators - and to take over. He was looking to win glory - authority - power - wealth. Only to find out that Jesus was offering the opposite - calling him to give up these things, to follow him to the cross - to shame - humility - self-sacrifice and service.
- Why would you do that? What do you get out of it?
  
- I wonder - how often do we look to Jesus in the same way?
- /As a means to an end - thinking that, by following him, we'll get something out of it - that having faith will help me reach my goals - and that obeying his commands will help me maximize my potential - fix the things that are going wrong and increase the gains and benefits in my life.
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- In our Youth Group lessons for the past several weeks, we've been talking about different types of prayer - Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication
  - Of these, adoration is perhaps the hardest to explain
  - We're familiar with the others - supplication especially - asking for things (for ourselves and others), giving thanks for the things we receive and for what God has done, confessing our mistakes and wrongdoings
  - But what exactly is adoration - "the lifting up of the heart and mind to God, asking nothing but to enjoy God's presence."
- It is not a transaction - you don't "get" anything from it - being in God's presence is its own reward. Like spending time with a friend - or being together with a loved one - this is not a means to an end, or serving a point outside itself, helping me reach my goals - it is the goal.
- Teresa of Avila likens this kind of "lifting up of the heart and mind to God" simply for the enjoyment of being in his presence, to a "close sharing between

friends,” as she says, it is “taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us.”

- In a sense, that is the example Mary sets for us - tuning out the distractions around her, and focusing only on him, on Jesus - the most important thing in her world - and delighting in his presence while she can.
- She has heard - and she now knows- she will not always have this kind of opportunity to be with him - Jesus is leaving soon for Jerusalem. The Passover festival is but 6 days away. The one who raised her brother Lazarus from the dead is about to go to his own death, as a sacrificial lamb, a passover lamb, to be the deliverer of his people.
- She - above all others - gets the significance of the moment - sitting in his presence - with the one who will pour himself out in love - she memorializes the event- pouring out her most precious possession on his feet - bowing down and wiping them with her hair (her “glory”).
- The fragrance of the act - the remembrance of it - spread beyond the event - it would be remember later, when Jesus taught his disciples that they too should wash each others feet - and shows them how, and beyond that, when he hung upon the cross and she looked on - I wonder if the scent was still in her hair - if she could still smell and remember that night - and when lay buried in the tomb, if the fragrance was still there to remind her of his promise. “She has kept it for my burial” Jesus says - kept it, the memory of being in his presence - in the nard poured out on his feet - and the fragrance soaked in her hair, recalling his presence.
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- Adoration is, in a sense, like stopping to smell the roses.
- We might think we have no time for it - or can’t see the use or the benefit - but, in truth, what else are we hoping for?
- Paul - in our reading from the epistle for today - says he regards all things as loss - regards it as rubbish - in relation to gaining Christ and being found in him.
- Being in the presence of the Lord - if only for a moment - is like inhaling the fragrance of a sweet perfume - is both a reminder and an anticipation - reminding us of what we have to look forward to - fully dwelling where true joys are to be found - in the presence of the Lord.