

Photos of the Faith – Perfume

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Introduction

It has been a very long week, and it was only Tuesday. The Master had been teaching almost non-stop since His arrival in the capital city just two days before. Some were eager to hear what He had to say. Some had long since given up that He was going to say what they wanted to hear.

Even as the events of this Tuesday night, the religious officials were plotting to bring an end to His efforts. He was becoming a public nuisance at the very least, they thought. He may have even created irreparable damage to the political stability in the region. Either way He needed to be stopped.

But on this particular night, the Master had a chance to relax a bit. He was exhausted. He had a lot on His mind. And His feet hurt, so He was grateful for the opportunity to sit down and enjoy a good meal with His friends. Home-cooked meals were a rarity these days.

The host of the meal was a man named Simon. Simon owed his life to the Master. Had they not met earlier, Simon would most certainly have been dead by now. He had a debilitating disease that still causes people today to shudder when it is mentioned: leprosy. Simon the leper, people called him. The Master had healed him, but the nickname still remained.

So caught up was Simon the leper in the excitement of having the Master over for dinner, that he forgot to offer the most basic of hospitalities that night. Somehow he forgot to wash the dust off of the Master's feet. In fact, no one else noticed either. Or at least, no one pointed it out. Until.

Until out of the crowd gathered outside in the streets hoping to get a glimpse of the Master or somehow benefit from His presence in their community ... until out of that crowd came a woman, a woman named Mary. Was she Mary ... the woman from whom the Master had cast out seven demons? Or was she Mary ... the sister of the recently resurrected Lazarus? It could have been either, for both owed the Master a debt of gratitude that could never be repaid.

Quietly she slipped into the dining room and knelt at the dusty, dirty, aching feet of the Master. There, to the stunned amazement of those around the table, she broke open a bottle of very expensive perfume. A combination of her tears of gratitude and that expensive oil wet His feet. Her hair was the towel that dried them again.

And the Biblical text says quite simply:

The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. (John 12:3)

We are in week five of our seven part sermon series titled "Photos of the Faith." Each week as we highlight the lectionary reading from Ephesians we capture the teaching in a picture suitable for framing. Just like the pictures from your vacation help you remember where you went and what you did, these photos help us remember what our journey of faith should be like:

- Week 1: A plumb line
- Week 2: A brick
- Week 3: A measuring cup
- Week 4: The number 1
- And now this week, we snap a picture of a bottle of perfume.

Here's the phrase that prompts today's picture:

Walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 5:2)

Other translations talk about a "sweet perfume." Don't miss this! You are going to love it! When we walk in the way of love as Jesus did, we become – like Him -- a sweet perfume in the nostrils of God.

The Apostle Paul captures that same imagery in his second letter to the church at Corinth:

But thanks be to God, who ... uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ ... (2 Corinthians 2:15)

By contrast, however, those who choose to walk outside of this "way of love" produce a smell of a different kind. Look at these words in Isaiah 65:

These people are like a stench in my nostrils, a smoldering fire that doesn't go out! (Isaiah 65:5, TPT)

Your aroma fills the space around you. That sounds like a commercial for deodorant, doesn't it? We could put together a whole marketing campaign: "You too can smell like Jesus!"

So what is the aroma of your life? Not surprisingly, the text gives us insights!

#1: THE STENCH

That aroma is produced by a lengthy list of ingredients.

Put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor... .. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful

with their own hands... Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths ... And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. (Ephesians 4:25-31)

Instinctively we know those things are stinky ... because we don't like to be on the receiving end of it. But sometimes we can't smell how bad it is when we are the ones doing it.

I earned three varsity letters in wrestling when I was in high school. That sounds a lot more impressive than it actually was. The truth is I was terrible, but I was the only one available for my particular weight class. And as bad as I was, I was better than a forfeit. As long as I didn't get pinned, my team came out ahead. And if I were to somehow win, that was like Christmas.

If you have ever been around wrestlers you know that they stink. I walked into the house after my first day of practice, only to hear my Mom say "You're not bringing that smell into my house!" For three years I had to hang my practice gear on the clothes line out back so they could air out first. Keep in mind, wrestling is a winter sport. It made no difference.

The point is this: I didn't think it was that bad, but Mom did. It was a stench in her nostrils.

I think that is often our view when it comes to the list of stinky things in this passage in Ephesians. We do it, and we don't consider it to be all that bad. Maybe it even smells "normal" to us. But our opinion is not universal, and it is certainly not divine.

In the verses immediately preceding today's text, Paul reminded his readers of the lessons he taught them a few years back when he was their pastor:

You were taught ... to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires ... and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:22-24)

Like a change of clothing, take off the stinky stuff and come into the life of faith smelling fresh and clean.

- Your mouth should not be a place filled with outright lies, half-truths and other unwholesome talk.
- You need to keep your temper under control.
- Don't devote your energies to unproductive things.
- And above all, don't make God sad that you call yourself a Christian.

Like a gym bag of used wrestling clothes, these things smell. And we are called to set them aside for a very simple and a very good reason:

for we are all members of one body. (Ephesians 4:25)

So if those are the stinky things we are to take off, what shall we put on?

#2: THE PERFUME

Look at verse 32:

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:32)

This list is half as long, but it is at least twice as hard. Responding in a stinky way is, after all, a relatively easy thing to do.

In J. F. Powers' short story titled "The Trouble," there is a very moving scene in which a young black man expresses a pretty profound truth. In the midst of a race riot in a major American city, a black family watches the fighting in the streets from the safety of their apartment. The mother of the family had been caught in the initial phase of the riot and had escaped to the safety of the apartment. She is in pretty bad shape. Both the doctor and the priest had been summoned.

The young man mentioned earlier is sitting with his grandmother at one of the windows, watching the chaos in the street below. Whites chasing blacks, blacks chasing whites. The scene was sheer bedlam and horror. All of the sudden the boy notices a white man running down the street. He turns the corner and heads down the alley behind the boy's apartment building, just ahead of the group of black teens who were chasing him. The man had made a fatal mistake, for the alley is a dead end. There is no escape for him.

The gang comes around the corner and the boy recoils in horror, terrified at what he is about to see. But just then, the back door of the apartment building opens up. The boy's grandmother, seeing the predicament of the man, has left the safety of her observation window and gone down to help him.

The boy's mind swirls with these thoughts: "I was very glad for the white man until I remember my mama all broken to pieces on her bed. And then I was sorry that Grandma did it. And then again, I was happy that she helped. Then I got ahold of this funny idea. I told myself the trouble is, somebody gets cheated, or insulted or killed. And then everybody else thinks they can make it come out even by cheating, or insulting or killing. Only it never turns out that way.

The boy then concludes that the trouble will never stop until someone decides to respond in a different way. The Apostle Paul shows us the way:

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:32)

This is the perfume that brings pleasure to our Heavenly Father.

APPLICATION

In this passage Paul has set before us the highest standard possible. We are to be imitators of God:

Follow God's example. (Ephesians 5:1)

Particularly we are called to imitate the love and grace of God that resulted in His forgiveness of all the stinky stuff you have carried into His presence. That's the perfume, the sweet aroma, that He desire from you.

So think through your life. Where is your response creating a stench instead of a sweet perfume? Put it off and set it aside – just like that old wrestling gear. And put on the sweet smell of kindness, compassion and forgiveness.

Amen.