

Long in the Nostril
John 12:1-8 and Lily of the Valley Incense
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Students of early twentieth century literature may remember the following words: “When nothing else subsists from the past, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls bearing resiliently, on tiny and almost impalpable drops of their essence, the immense edifice of memory.” So wrote the French novelist Marcel Proust in “The Remembrance of Things Past,” also titled in some editions by the more literal translation “In Search of Lost Time.” Proust, although neither a psychologist nor a biologist, is credited with coming up with the idea of “involuntary memory,” or the phenomenon of certain memories being brought to the forefront of our consciousness when triggered by events outside of ourselves, most especially things we smell. Also called “sense memory,” it is what Proust identified as the interaction of the senses and the memory, and the ways in which certain sensory stimuli can trigger powerful memories. Researchers who work with memory have learned that the five senses can play a very significant role in the process of making, storing, and retrieving memories. Smell in particular is very evocative, as the olfactory bulb is located right next to the part of the brain that handles memory storage, so people tend to create strong links between smells and particular memories. Many people have strong associations with a huge variety of

smells, ranging from “my grandmother's house” to “that one really good meal,” and smell is sometimes used in marketing to recall such memories and encourage people to buy things. People selling their homes are often encouraged to bake bread before an open house, or light pumpkin-scented candles, because these are known to provoke pleasant memories of home in a lot of people. Human beings can recognize up to ten thousand different smells, all through a tiny little dot of membrane at the top of the nose in that olfactory bulb. While not as advanced as that of dogs and other animals, the human sense of smell is indeed quite remarkable.

You will remember that Jesus had just recently been to the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, when Lazarus became ill, and Jesus was summoned to cure him. Alas, Jesus did not arrive in time to save his friend from death, although he did arrive in time to raise him from the grave, as he famously stood before the tomb and cried, “Lazarus, come out!” and he did. You will also remember a key feature of that story having to do with the sense of smell, when Martha advises Jesus that there would be an awful stench when they rolled away the stone from the tomb, since he had been dead for four days. In other words, the last time Jesus visited the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, the prevailing aroma in the home was death, both literally from the body, and emotionally, as the place was filled with mourners. There was no baking bread, nor pumpkin-scented candles. There was just the reality that someone had died.

Not too long after, Jesus visited that house once again, because “they gave a dinner for him,” perhaps a token of gratitude for having done such an amazing thing for their family. We may surmise that Lazarus has regained his strength, and that the family has recovered from the shock of both his death, and his return to life, and they are now able to get back into a more normal routine. This dinner takes place a mere six days before the Passover, a clue to us readers that the end, or at least the climax of the story, is very near. We know this because after Jesus raises Lazarus, the authorities became more determined than ever to get rid of him, and the city of Jerusalem was abuzz with rumors of whether Jesus would make an appearance during the high holiday. Jesus has come to this dinner with his disciples, who had also been there when Lazarus was raised. They too had experienced the aroma of death permeating that house and family. And so, at some point during the evening, Mary makes her way into the midst of the crowd, and undertakes this extraordinary act of bathing Jesus’ feet in perfume, and wiping it up with her hair, and incurring the ire of Judas, who complains about the waste of money that could have been used to feed the poor, or, to feed his retirement fund. “Leave her alone,” Jesus says, “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.”

The Gospel has painted a beautiful picture for us of this scene, including the wonderful detail that “The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume” that Mary had used to anoint the feet of Jesus. Knowing what we know about

“involuntary memory,” and the power of smell especially to trigger powerful memories, I don’t think there is any way that the people in Mary, Martha, and Lazarus’ house that evening would ever forget the smell of nard, that ancient perfume, nor the one anointed by it, Jesus Christ. Mary gave not only Jesus, but also the rest of them, a very special gift. Every time they smelled nard, in the marketplace, passing by the home of a wealthy person, at another funeral, they would remember Jesus, Mary, her act of extravagant love, and what it all meant. And if that weren’t enough, even within this same story, focused as it is on the sense of smell, there are stimuli from the other senses as well. All eyes were on Mary to be sure as she anointed Jesus’ feet, watching her movements with incredulity. We may imagine both the complete silence in the room, but also the gasps of those in attendance, and the swooshing of Mary’s hair across the floor. Hands gripping shoulders in front of them, muscles tensing as the anxiety rose, hairs standing up on the back of the neck, goosebumps forming on the arm. A bitter taste in the mouth of at least Judas, but perhaps others who shared his doubt, and who missed the extravagance of grace before them. Yes, in a moment like that, all the senses tingle, and we know we are witnessing fully a moment like few others, in this case, a moment of sheer grace and discipleship.

You see, Mary is the disciple who really gets it: gets it even before Jesus tells the disciples what they need to get, when he washes their feet and tells them to love one another. The parallels between what Mary does here, and what Jesus does

following the last supper, are striking. She is a woman ahead of her time. Not only that, but she functions like a prophet, announcing God's intentions before the act takes place, preparing Jesus for the burial he has been announcing himself, but that so few others were willing to acknowledge. Even though the others have seen the same things, and more, Mary gets it, and acts on it, and gifts them all, and us, with something more valuable than all our money: the opportunity to unlock, like she did, our humanity, and our compassion, and our obedience, and indeed our very purpose, to glorify God and enjoy God forever. You see, as crushing as is the poverty that Judas would address with three hundred denarii, yet more crushing to the human spirit is the lack of humanity, of compassion, of obedience, of purpose. But when, with Mary's help in awakening our senses, we recognize those things, when we take them into our hearts and hands and use them, they make those three hundred denarii look like nothing more than the pieces of cast metal that they are.

Tonight's Gospel story gives us a glimpse into what I would call "spiritual sense memory" – the linking of what we experience through our bodies, through our senses, to God's grace in the world and in our lives. We are blessed to be attuned to the sights, sounds, textures, flavors, and aromas that link us one to another, and to God, in ways which both strengthen and challenge our faith. Our spiritual sense memory is called forth by something external to our selves, and when that smell or that taste, or that sound or that vision or texture creep into our consciousnesses, they unlock those divine memories which motivate us or

challenge us or give us strength or hope when they are sorely needed. In all that sensory information is our story of faith. For how many of you does hearing the twenty-third psalm take you back to third grade, and memorizing it for your first Bible? It does for me every time.

How many of those who have gone to Haiti following the earthquake will be able to disassociate the smell of death from thoughts of that country, or their disquiet about the power of God?

How many of those who have worked with prostitutes fleeing that life will be able to forget the fear they have seen in the eyes of women trying to change?

How many of those who heard the song, “We Shall Overcome,” sung in the streets in the 1960s, will be able to hold back tears in their eyes upon hearing it again?

Could the woman who touched the hem of Jesus’ garment and was healed from her twelve years of hemorrhages ever stop searching for the feel of that fabric?

Can there ever be another bread or wine that compares, for those who have tasted the Lord’s Supper?

The Bible is a very sensory book, made up as it is in part by the Old Testament language of Hebrew, a very concrete language that uses concrete images to convey abstract truths. Perhaps there is no better example of this than the words from Exodus 34:6 which read, “The Lord passed before Moses, and

proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.’ ” The phrase “slow to anger” has also been translated as “long suffering” or “patient”, but none of these really capture what the Hebrew is trying to say. You see, the most literal translation of “Slow to anger” is “long of nostril” or “long nostrils.” We can surmise that the longer the nostril, the longer it took for a smell to reach the olfactory gland, thus delaying the expected reaction of anger.

Let me suggest that God’s nostrils are adjustable – there’s an image for you! When it comes to wrath, we see that God has long nostrils, but I have to believe that God’s nostrils were short that evening in the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, that the perfume that quickly filled that home also quickly filled the nostrils of God, and pleased them, just as Jesus was pleased by her offering. Furthermore, I have to believe that God’s nostrils are short when we offer ourselves as living sacrifices, whether or not those sacrifices involve perfume. You see, the way we practice our faith is helping to build the involuntary spiritual sense memory of those who come after us. When our children and grandchildren hear us pray, those sounds are stored away in their memories. When they see us on our knees, that image is filed away for future. When they smell the sweat of our labors for the sake of others, it is only a matter of time before the smell of sweat brings back that memory which causes them to give their all, maybe even their lives, for someone else. This is what Mary did for those in her home that day, as her offering

filled the house with the fragrance of perfume. This is what I hope to do with this incense today, that every time you smell it somewhere, it will bring you back to this moment and that you will remember -- not my words, but the extravagant act of Mary, as she honored God in such a powerful way.

I want to leave you with a final word of Scripture, this one from the Apostle Paul, a passage we could call the last word on Mary's anointing of Jesus. It comes from 2 Corinthians, and it speaks to what took place that evening in the hearts of those who believed, and those who could not. Paul writes, "But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life." You see, the aroma that mattered in the house that evening was not the one Mary released from a bottle of perfume, but rather the one that blew forth from her heart and blessed those who were able to sense it. May we take our cue from Mary and be the aroma of Christ, a fragrance which brings life. Amen.