

## Sermon.

*And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*

Can you smell it? Breathe in deep, can you feel the warmth in your lungs? Exhale. Breathe in deep, the prick in your nose, the water gathering in your eyes. Can you smell it?

12 ounces of perfume poured out over Jesus' feet, dried off with Mary's hair. No words are spoken. All you can do to understand what it means is to listen and watch.

*And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*

The scent activates a vivid memory, like a flashback in a movie.

The same perfume, the same aroma, different feet and hands though. These were the hands and feet of Mary and Martha's brother Lazarus. They'd summoned Jesus to their home here in Bethany, but he was too late to make a difference. Lazarus succumbed to whatever illness he was plagued with. Now, filled with all the why's and what ifs, they place their brother in the tomb.

Eventually, Jesus shows up, and he too, was overcome with grief and burst into tears at the death of his friend, Lazarus.

From this shared grief, Jesus walks to the tomb where Lazarus had been buried. He tells the villagers to open it, but they resist because they say the stench will be too great if he's been dead a few days already.

Nonetheless, Jesus commands that Lazarus come out, and he does, maybe not unlike a mummy in some horror movie, only in this case he's fully alive and healed—restored to life. The love of his family still lingering on his burial clothes.

*And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*

Back to the present, and Jesus has returned to their home. And this time Lazarus and Jesus both are on time to supper, joining Mary and Martha. And as Mary begins to anoint Jesus' feet, the significance is as palpable as the aroma.

Unspoken gratitude.  
Unspoken appreciation.  
Unspoken celebration.

*And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*

Theologian Dr. Jae Won Lee reminds us that the irony in Jesus raising a man back to *life* is that it will ultimately lead to Jesus' own *death*.<sup>1</sup> This may be the straw that broke the camel's back, but in John's

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<sup>1</sup> Jae Won Lee, "Exegetical Perspective, John 12:1-8," Lent 5, Year C, Vol. 2, *Feasting on the Word*.

Gospel, the resurrection/resuscitation of Lazarus sets Jesus' final days in motion.

The chief religious leader hatches a plan with the establishment to kill Jesus in order to save the nation, afraid that Jesus might lead another failed uprising against Rome. Instead, this reasoning again ironic in John's Gospel, as it is Jesus' death and life that will ultimately save the world and not just Israel. The irony extends even further: for the religious establishment decides that because the people are following Jesus after the resurrection/resuscitation of Lazarus, they will now have to kill Lazarus, too. Now two men must die. It's fair to wonder if that's where it will end.

John doesn't say *that* room was filled with any aroma, but the stench of conspiracy, collusion, and assassination wafting in the air was certainly some kind of fishy.

*And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*

Maybe because she lives in the locus of hostility in Lazarus' hometown, but Mary's anointing of Jesus suggests she understands the urgency of Jesus' hour.

Jesus is sure to point this out as he acknowledges the perfume was going to be used for his burial much as it was for Lazarus'.

And in such a way, Jesus is lifting up Mary, who is physically kneeling down at his feet, elevating her as his lead disciple; she has understood what Jesus has been saying about his purpose *and* his identity as God's chosen one. He has been saying, and she has been listening, that he must die.

And so her act of extravagance is also an act of discipleship. Of listening and following, of comprehending and embodying, what Jesus has been teaching. This is an act of devotion and love.

*And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*

At dinner, she wipes Jesus' feet with her hair.

The late Dean of Wake Forest Divinity School, Dr. Gail O'Day, made two important references to the Greek in this story.<sup>2</sup> The word for *dinner* or *supper* used in this story, is only used in one other context in John's Gospel. It's in the chapter to follow, when Jesus shares his last supper with his disciples.

And it's at that supper when he will take a basin of water and put on an apron and kneel down at the disciples' feet. And using the same Greek word that the author used for Mary *wiping* Jesus' feet with her hair, Jesus will wash and *wipe* the disciples' feet.

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<sup>2</sup> Gail R. O'Day, "John," The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Vol. IX, 701.

## The Fragrance of Grace

John 12:1-11

Brent Newberry

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The Fifth Sunday in Lent

And he will go on to instruct them to do the same for one another, giving them a new commandment, that Mary had already embodied in front of all of them: that they love one another. Because, as Jesus says, "This is how others will know you are my disciples, if you love one another."

*And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*

Can you smell it?

Breathe in deep, can you feel the warmth in your lungs? Exhale, and breathe in deep, the prick in your nose, the water gathering in your eyes. Can you smell it?

It's just us now, sitting in the room. They've all left. On to Jerusalem where we'll catch up with them next week, cheering and jeering, chants of hosanna and haunts of crucify him. But for right now, we're lingering in this moment like the last of that perfume.

Can you still smell the fragrance of grace?

Breathe in deep, the aroma of cookies the youth are baking for the Mustard Seed.

Breathe in deep, the scent of coffee and bagels, Burmese food at Friendship hour, homemade bread for communion, pies for fundraisers, pizza for movie night.

Breathe in deep, the smell of an old house, stretching and shifting underneath the

resurrected hopes of families and dreams of interfaith hospitality.

Breathe in deep, the strong scent of sterile hallways as you visit loved ones in their hospital rooms.

Breathe in deep, the smell of the snowblower or maybe that's a lawn mower that you've just finished using for your unsuspecting neighbor.

Breathe in deep, the aroma of sustenance, dirt and vegetables and new life in a community garden.

Breathe in deep, the spice of a meal prepared by friends wearing aprons, inviting you into their lives, sharing their culture, showing their love.

Breathe in deep.

Can you smell it?

People will know us by our love.

*And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*

Amen.

## Prayer.

O Christ who taught us how to love, how to follow, how to live, grant that we might have the courage to be your disciples.

Costly as it might be to us, teach us how to love with a grace that lingers. Show us how to learn from one another, as you modeled for the disciples with Mary's act of washing your feet, as you washed their feet, as you challenge us to wash one another's feet.

Give us the humility to serve instead of expecting to be served.

Generate vision in us that we might see and seize the opportunities to live as ones anointed by God for good works of love and justice.