

John 12:1-8 5 Lent 4.3.25

In the King James version of the Bible, in the story about Lazarus and his death we are told that after Lazarus died, “He stinketh.” My grandson Liam, who is really quite active and a heavy sweater, when he participates in sports “stinketh” sometimes. The odor of sweat sometimes is off-putting. Death, John would have us know, has a putrid smell. Literally, it often does. Dead bodies that have been laying unattended in homes and other places can really smell. I assume that those EMT personnel who found Gene Hackman and his wife’s bodies were greeted with a terrible stench.

Death stinketh, but not simply literally. Metaphorically, it stinks. Oh ya, sometimes it is welcome news. Sometimes we will call it “sweet death.” In individual cases, death can be what we long for. Yet, death, Death with the big D, stinketh. It is the wet blanket that is cast over all parties, over all gatherings, over all nations. It is an unwelcome smell.

Today we meet Jesus, after he has taken on the putrid reality of death, by raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus’ good friend had died. And he, like his other friends Mary and Martha, hadn’t welcomed his death. In fact, he was ticked off by it. John tells us that “he was greatly disturbed in spirit,” words that are associated with the sounds that a horse makes when it angrily snorts. Stink. Stank. Stunk. That was Jesus’ estimation of what happened to Lazarus. He despised it, and he did something about it. He raised him from death.

Well, a few days after this remarkable action, obviously fully recovered, Lazarus, along with Mary and Martha, have a dinner party for Jesus. Martha, as she seems prone to do, is serving at the party.

Lazarus, I don't know, maybe a little winded, is sitting at the table. Mary, though, becomes the prime actor in this story. She takes some expensive healing or palliative perfume, *nard* that likely had been imported from India, and anoints Jesus' feet, wiping them with her hair.

This is an act of such extravagance. In many ways, it seems wasteful. Judas notes the waste. He asks, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii (twenty to thirty thousand dollars) and the money given to the poor?" I understand Judas' mentality. It's the kind of question I would have asked.

I grew up in conservative Cincinnati where I learned that you didn't spend more than you had, where I began the practice of never ordering a drink with a meal, because, well, that would be extravagant, wasteful. I still don't do it. It makes the gift cards last longer.

My Mom hated it when things were wasted. Last year when we were in Greece on the final night of our trip, we were taken to a restaurant in which we participated in the Greek tradition of the breaking of plates. Stack after stack of plates were brought to us—plates that we were to throw to the ground and smash. For some of us, it felt really good, like we were doing something we shouldn't do. Our anger was being expressed. We sometimes repressed church people were being naughty. As we were smashing the plates, I couldn't help but think of my Mom. She, a woman who grew up in the Depression, would have hated experiencing such waste. What are you doing?

Mary's action was extravagant, wasteful. It was way over the top. But she was in the presence of the Really Big. Jesus was there.

What really mattered in life was before her eyes. Extravagant love, extravagant forgiveness, extravagant grace had entered Lazarus' home. The only right response was extravagance. Stinginess wasn't going to do the trick. It never does. When extravagance is your experience, stingy love stinks. The dollar tip for the waiter or waitress who has just provided you great service is putrid. It stinketh.

Note what John tells us after Mary washes Jesus' feet with expensive perfume: "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." The whole house. The whole house was transformed. The smell of the perfume penetrated every corner of the house, even the stinky parts. Lazarus, when he was dead, "stunketh," but now the smell is sweet, sweet for every nook and cranny.

I love what John Petty says about this, "Death smells putrid but is limited. The life of Jesus is fragrant and fills the space." The sweetness of the life of Jesus permeates everything. Jesus, according to John, is the new thing that is happening, the new thing that God is up to. And this new thing is sweeter than sweet.

Now, I have to point out, though, what the end of the text tells us. After Judas protests Mary's action and after John makes it clear that he is not overly fond of Judas, Jesus speaks to Judas: "Leave her alone. Release her. Maybe even, give her a break. Mary bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." In other words, she is beginning the process of anointing me for my death. She is getting me ready to die. The story is pressing on. We are heading toward Holy Week. We have to talk about death again.

Heck, I thought death was a thing of the past. I was hoping that the thing that stinketh had been thrown in the trash, buried in the

ground. No, it's not that easy. We are being confronted once again with death. What stinks won't let go. But I must tell you this, especially since I am preaching from the Gospel of John. This stinky thing that is about to happen will be brutal, ugly. It will be like a giant mirror that will reveal what human beings do too often. It will let us know that we stink sometimes. But John would have us also know that this stinky truth is no match for the love that God has for the world. John tells us, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son."

The cross is going to be very stinky. And don't be too quick to try to get rid of the stinkiness. Let it smell. But know this. The story we are about ready to enter into is fundamentally about the sweet smelling love of God that penetrates every nook and cranny of the world. The whole house will be filled with the fragrance of the perfume that wafts from the extravagance of Mary. The cross of Jesus will be lifted high so that *the whole world* will know of the great sacrificial love of God.

Yes, Jesus' life will be extinguished. The crabby people—and by the way, they exist in every generation, making a command performance these days—will try to get rid of the sweet-smelling Jesus. They will waste all kinds of pettiness, desires for revenge, hatred on their goal to rid the world of the abundance and extravagance discovered in Jesus. But their ugly wastefulness will be no match for the beautiful, extravagant love of God, for the sweet-smelling perfume that seeks to and will fill every space. Nothing is wasted in the economy of God. Jesus' death is the world's attempt to bring to waste a life of such abundance and grace. But in God's

world, nothing is wasted. The death of Jesus, at least according to John, will mean life for the world.

“Death smells putrid but is limited. The life of Jesus is fragrant and fills the space.” As we head into Holy Week, know that what we are about to experience really will stink. Death is rancid. It always is. But even death, the death of Jesus is not wasted in the economy of God. There will be a sweet smell that will flow from it. Do yourself and the world a favor. Breathe that smell in. Be overcome with the extravagant grace and love of God, so overcome that no one will dare to say to you, “You stinketh.” No, rather, they will say, the fragrance of the life of Jesus and his death that fills the whole world has even permeated you.