

The Smell of Love
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John 12:1-8

Scents are powerful.

You can be walking down the street and catch a whiff
 of a cologne an old boyfriend wore or a perfume your mother used to wear,
 and an old feeling can rush over you instantly.

You can pass a bakery that smells like grandma's house
 or a wet dog that smells like the blanket your dad kept
 in the back of the station wagon,
 and you're almost transported back in time.

We associate scents with feelings, memories, people, and places.
 It is true for both joy and pain.

A smell that others find comforting
 could be a trigger of past trauma to another.

I've read that this connection with scent and memory is because
 "Olfaction, emotion, and memory share closely networked real estate
 in the brain's limbic system."¹

So I want to hear your answers to these questions out loud;
 those on Zoom please write your responses in the chat.

We'll start with an easy one:

What smells do you associate with playing as a child?

What about family vacations growing up—what did they smell like?

If I were to say the word "home" to you, what would that smell like?

What about safety? What does "safe" smell like?

What does "love" smell like?

What does "grief" smell like?

For the woman in our scripture today, love and grief smelled the same.

Different versions of this story appear in all four Gospels,
 but this one, in the Gospel According to John, identifies the woman as Mary,
 the sister of Lazarus and Martha.

As you know, in a previous story Mary and Martha sent for Jesus
 when Lazarus became ill.

¹ Skinner, Matt. Commentary on the Gospel for March 21, 2010, www.workingpreacher.org.

But by the time Jesus got there, Lazarus had already died.

In fact, he'd been in the tomb four days.

When Jesus arrived he commanded the people to take away the stone lying against the tomb.

Martha warned Jesus: You know what happens to bodies in the tomb.

Are you sure you want to do that?

But Jesus was sure. He prayed, and then he cried out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

And out walked a man believed to be dead.

Or, in the words of Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor,

Lazarus "came stumbling from this tomb, trailing his shroud behind him like a used cocoon."²

This miracle happened just a short time before our story of Mary pouring the perfume on Jesus' feet.

Only twelve verses, in fact, separate that story from this one—a period of a few days, most likely.

Given the timing, I have to wonder: why did she have this nard?

This is a perfume used for preparing bodies for burial.

Her brother had just died. Why hadn't she used it then?

Was this the "left-overs" from that burial preparation?

But it was worth nearly a year's wage for a laborer—

who would spend that kind of money and then not use it?

The NRSV translation says she bought it for Jesus' burial, but scholars argue about that translation.

It's not clear why she had it.

It's a bit more clear why she used it.

First, I think she used it out of sheer gratitude.

How do you thank someone for bringing your loved one back from the dead?

What gift is big enough, what expression sufficient?

A Hallmark card and an Edible Arrangement aren't gonna' cut it.

This kind of gratitude does not call for a moderate response.

It is an extravagant gift in response to an extravagant act.

I think the second reason she does it is because she "gets it."

Unlike the disciples, Mary understands what is to come.

² Taylor, Barbara Brown. "The Prophet Mary." www.day1.org, March 21, 2010.

Throughout the Gospels, the disciples are often clueless.

They argue over who is the greatest.

They try to prove they are better than one another.

They seem powerless to cast out even the smallest demon.

The disciples are especially clueless about Jesus' death.

Jesus has predicted it, and they have ignored it.

Jesus has tried to prepare them for it, and they have dismissed it.

They still get hung up on what they think Jesus' mission *should* be instead of what it is.

In contrast to the disciples, it's typically the people on the margins who see Jesus most clearly.

It is the voiceless who are most able to hear.

Mary knows the truth: Jesus is heading to Jerusalem, where he will die.

He will not lead a revolt.

He will not defeat the Romans.

He will not become king.

They will be celebrating the Passover in the next few days,

when they remember how the angel of death passed over their people,

when the blood on the doorpost protected their sons.

But Mary knows that soon there will be blood,

and Jesus will not be passed over.

And so she throws caution to the wind.

“First she loosens her hair in a room full of men,
which an honorable woman never does.

Then she pours perfume on Jesus' feet, which also is not done.

The head, maybe—people do that to kings—but not the feet.

Then she touches him—a single woman rubbing a single man's feet—
also not done, not even among friends.”³

But Jesus does not rebuke Mary for her actions.

He knows why she has done this.

The last time Jesus was in her home,

the stench of death hung heavy on the air.

Now she wants the air to hang heavy with the aroma of her love.

For Mary, love smells like burial spices.

Love smells like an outpouring of extravagance.

³ Ibid.

We need this kind of love in the world—
 love that risks ridicule;
 love that risks pain.
 Sometimes our acts of love—
 like Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead—
 bring us to life.
 And other times our acts of love—
 like Mary anointing Jesus' feet—
 prepare us for letting go.

It is hard to let go.
 It is hard to give your last gift to someone who is dying.
 It is harder still to risk that last gift being ridiculed.
 Her heart was both full of love
 and broken by her love—
 full but broken, broken but full.

This “Full to the Brim” theme is a package we purchased for Lent.
 It comes with liturgy and social media posts and the devotional booklet,
 giving you wonderful resources during Lent
 and giving us preachers time to focus on sermon preparation
 (since it does not provide sermons).
 I have liked it. I've heard from some of you that you like it, too.
 But yesterday's Facebook post bothered me.
 It said, “As people of faith, we are called to crack ourselves open,
 pouring out the richness of what is within to more fully worship God.”
 This quote reminded me of a Christian song from the 1980s about this story
 that said we were to be “broken and spilled out, and used up” for God.
 Far too many of us have spent far too long being broken—
 broken by abuse, by trauma,
 by parents who offered judgment instead of love,
 by significant others who belittled us,
 by religion that taught us we were not good enough.
 We have been broken and we do not need to be told our brokenness is required.

On the other had, some of us do need some breaking.
 Some of us have learned to shut ourselves off,
 to build fortresses around our hearts,
 and we do need to be broken open . . .

not broken apart or broken down, but broken open.

We are broken and full. Full and broken.

Mary has come full circle . . .

from her brother's death
to her brother's resuscitation
to Jesus' impending death.

So she brings all of it—the gratitude and the grief and the love—
and pours it out on Jesus feet.

But perhaps Jesus has come full circle, too.

Scholar and professor Karoline Lewis makes this point
by connecting this Mary to Mary the mother of Jesus.

She writes,

“I wonder if in this moment,

when Jesus is being loved with a grace upon grace kind of love,
an abundance of love, a love that you could even smell,
with a fragrance that would linger for days . . .

[I wonder if in this moment] Jesus remembered his mother.

Three years ago. Back in Cana. At that wedding.

His mother, who loved him,

who knew who he was and what he was capable of doing.

His mother, without whom, I wonder,

when Jesus' ministry would have actually gotten started.

Jesus insists [to his mother] it is not his time,

but his mother knows better, as mothers often do.

[She tells him about the wine and says “Do something!”]

Because of her insistence, Jesus starts doing what he came to do.

Because of her encouragement, Jesus realizes the time really had come.

Because of her love, Jesus can do what he was sent to do.

Jesus' mother loves Jesus into his future as the Word made flesh.

Now, in Bethany, Jesus finds himself in the same kind of position,
the same kind of transition.

Immediately after Mary anoints Jesus, he will enter the city of Jerusalem.

And so, Jesus needs that same encouragement, that same love,
to do what he must do.

Mary's extravagant love for Jesus makes it possible for Jesus

to show extravagant love in what follows —

washing the feet of his disciples,
handing himself over to be arrested in the garden,
carrying his own cross, dying, rising, and ascending.
Mary loves Jesus into his future
as the fulfillment of ‘for God so loved the world.’”⁴

Jesus needed these women to love him into his future.
We also need people to love us into our future,
to love us into our self,
into our calling.
And others need for us to love them into their future, too.

There may be some breaking open.
Don’t be afraid of the breaking.
There may be some healing of your broken pieces.
Don’t be afraid of the mending.
We are only being loved into our future.

When we were foster parents, I read about another foster parent of young children
who always used lavender lotion on herself and on the babies in her care.
She wanted them to have a scent that, no matter where life took them,
would always remind them of being loved.
She loved them into an unknown future.

Sometimes love smells like lavender lotion.
Sometimes love smells like a food truck in a church parking lot.
Love smells like culturally-appropriate food at the food kitchen.
Love smells like spring planting.
Love smells like composting.
Love smells like lotion rubbed onto the feet of a dying loved one.
What does your love smell like?
What does God’s?

⁴ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/loved-into-future>