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The Smell of Good News Isaiah 42: 5-10/2 Cor 2: 12-3: 6

Each and every one of us is gifted. Yes, I mean the talents, skills and intelligence we possess. I am also talking about the many other gifts in life we enjoy. The tastes and sights and feelings we experience. That moment when you bit into and tasted your favorite food. Or, the occasion when you felt understood because someone took the time to share with you how much you meant to them.

Or the experience when you saw some amazing aspect of nature...a crested plateau glowing with color as the sun sets, a mountain creek flowing over the edge of a cliff, a colony of ants building a kingdom one grain of sand at a time. Can you see the beauty?

More than any other person in my life, Mary Elizabeth Weisinger, my grandmother...taught me how to savor simple gifts. Though she loved to talk more than anything I also remember those moments when she put her finger in front of her lips....shhhhhh....quieting our conversation....then she would point in the direction of something that was meant to be enjoyed. She taught me how to take time and enjoy....to savor.

It was people like my grandmother who lovingly and persistently brought attention to the evidence of life when in the wilderness journey.

She was one of those rare people, who would stop and remind others again and again to look, listen and love. She was the story keeper, the story teller.

Everything in my grandmother's home came with a story....even the smell of her home is a gift I cherish to this day....even though I've not been able to walk into her house for over 20 years.

There is no way for me to recreate the wonderfully distinct smell of my Nana's house...but if I close my eyes and focus my senses....it all comes alive for me.

I remember asking my mom not to wash my clothes after staying the night at her house as I wanted my grandmother's memory to mingle and stick around as long as it could.

But funny thing....washing machines nor time can erase the memory of walking into my grandmother's house and breathing in the smells reminding me of a place where I was invited to explore and be silly, laugh and discover how important it is to take the time to recognize the unique gifts God offers us throughout our lifetime. So with my grandmother and all her stories and life I breathe in and savor. She taught me how to smell the good news!

The sense of smelling is very much a way we remember and remain connected to certain life experiences. Interestingly in this letter to the Corinthians, Paul makes reference to just this, saying, "We are the aroma of Christ."

We are the aroma?

We smell?

This is what living faith is about?

How we smell?

It may seem a strange thing for Paul to write.....but to the people originally hearing these words.....they understood Paul's use of imagery.....or as we were reminded last week during the Children's sermon by one of our young ones....Paul's use of metaphor.

People in Paul's day were familiar with the traditions of the Roman government, especially on the occasion of celebrating a military victory. Elaborate processions/parades meandered through the city bringing the story to the people and inspiring them to participate in the story themselves.

These processions included the Senate and other elected officials, body guards carrying fasces (fa-seas)....which were bundles of wooden sticks bound together with an axe blade protruding from the center which was an image symbolizing power, jurisdiction and strength through unity....

then there came trumpeters, carts with the spoils of war, white bulls for sacrifice, the arms and insignia of the conquered enemy, the enemy leaders, followed by the Roman commander in a chariot drawn by four horses accompanied by the commanders sons and officers. Behind them the army without weapons or armor but clad in togas, and amidst them all were banner and incense bearers.

It's quite a scene....an overwhelming one at that. Can you imagine this procession passing by your home....the ground rumbling before their arrival, the sight of so many walking and ridingand when they are no longer in sight....the remaining aroma of incense from the incense bearers....wafting through the streets into doors and windows to serve as a lasting reminder of the story the procession was telling.

Paul's metaphor.....we are like this Roman procession. As we are called to live faith we are called to take the story into the streets, into our homes, into our everyday lives.

Like a procession of celebration we are called to tell the story of God's grace.....that it might mingle and hang around inviting others to participate.

We...our words, our actions, the way we live our lives....we are the incense, the aroma....living reminders of Christ's power to heal....reminders of Christ's power to create new life. We are the aroma of Christ.

Smell is a powerful sense. If we had the time to share some of our life stories it may be surprising just how many smells are connected to our memories. Of course....like our memories, not all smells are pleasant.

And here in lies the challenge of Paul's message as we continue in these days of Lent. For indeed if we are the aroma....the smell of God's good news.....then there remains the possibility that we....our living of faith....may not always result in a pleasant smell. More bluntly put....We in Christ's church sometimes stink.....and sometimes our lasting aroma has little to do with the healing and life Christ came to give.

It's easy for us to point outside the walls of this church to other faith communities for which Paul's smelly metaphor more aptly applies. The hideous examples of faith like Fred Phelps and his followers who consistently get media attention as they stand near funeral processions, schools and other churches with their "God hate" messages. This is not the aroma of Christ's healing.....this is not the leading of others to the genuine life God longs for us to live.

Unfortunately we don't always have to go too far to bump into the smelliness that can come with living faith. Just this week I visited with a woman working in a nearby used book store. As conversations go she eventually asked what I do.

When I told her I was a Presbyterian minister she flinched. I saw it in her eyes....the residue of bad memories. I invited her to share her story and she did. It was a church and a father who had reduced faith to a list of rules and expectations....who made it clear that she and others were expected to listen....but without the willingness to be listened to.

Ah, we don't have to go too far to encounter faith that is caustic and unsavory. I'll let the words of Ann Weems....a poet and a Presbyterian....speak:

I was warned that nobody likes
Poetry and certainly nobody buys it!
What worried me then, what worries me
still, is how easily we in the church
extract the amazing from grace
how easily we turn
Hossanna into ho-hum and
belief into bureaucracy and
righteousness into rules.

Addicted to our agendas,
 bound by our budgets, we fail to
 remember that the Love of God
 is written in our hearts
 not in the Book of Order,
 when we worship process
 we cover our eyes, our ears
 against the beautiful red words,
 the amazing words of the Word.
 Jesus told the people to love their enemies,
 and the people were amazed.
 He told them to have compassion for strangers,
 and the people were amazed.
 He overturned the tables of the money changers,
 and the people were amazed.
 He told them to pray for those who persecuted them,
 and the people were amazed.
 He broke the rules and healed on the Sabbath,
 and the people were amazed.
 While we in the church are spending
 our energy arguing,
 who will bind up the wounds?
 And who will free the oppressed?
 And who will feed the sheep?
 I'm back in the church down in Tennessee.
 Yes, yes, I know: The Presbyterians
 Have a history of fighting...but our faith has a
 history of forgiving.....
 I don't know how we ever got so unamazed
 But the amazing thing is this:
 Even now Jesus Speaks the poetry of God.
 Even now we can touch the hem
 of his robe and be healed.
 Even now we can share our bread and wine with a starving world.
 Even now, God the poet pours grace
 upon our heads like snow on snow on snow.
 Even now we can be amazed!

This Lent...I want to smell the good news of Christ...
 I don't want the aroma of grace and life to be washed away. I want it to mingle and stick
 around as long as it can.

Funny thing...washing machines nor time can erase the memory of walking into a place, a
 community of faith...and breathing in the smells reminding us we have been invited to explore
 and be silly, laugh and discover how important it is to take the time to recognize the unique gifts
 God offers us throughout our lifetime.
 And when we do this
 we can smell the good news...
 and we can live the good news....
 and our words and how we live faith can become a lasting gift.