

Sermon – John 12:1-8
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Grace Lutheran Church
5 Lent – Year C
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“An Olfactory Offering”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Amen.

1. Several months ago, the Board of Worship alerted me to a suggestion from one of you, a member of Grace. I don't know who made the suggestion, and if it was you, let this be my apology. Someone suggested that we consider the use of incense in worship. It's a practice both ancient and richly meaningful, creating sweet-smelling smoke that, like our prayers, wafts heavenward to God. It's beautiful but, without skipping a beat, I replied, “Absolutely not.” Now, I usually try to be a bit more measured in my responses; “Let's consider this,” I might say; “Let's form a committee.” But I just couldn't do it. Because as soon as I imagine a thurifer swinging a smoking thurible, I start to picture something else: myself, catatonic in the fetal position, gasping for breath and coughing in an unrelenting allergic fit. We might as well have people walking around swinging cats in here, casting off dander hither and yon. It would have the same effect on me, although, I must admit, it would not be so hard on the ears as would the willy-nilly swinging of felines. We could use incense but you'd need to put me on disability. The smell would just be too overwhelming; too much fragrance for me to focus on anything else. I apologize, and I wish it were otherwise, but there you go.
2. I can only imagine how I would've reacted had I been at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus on that fateful day before Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Mary, in an attitude of abundant and extravagant offering, empties

a pound of nard, worth twenty or thirty thousand dollars in today's money, onto the feet of Jesus, anointing him for his death and showing her love and adoration for Jesus. And the house, once filled with the stench of death – that of the lately dead Lazarus and the soon-to-be dead Jesus – is now suddenly filled with an olfactory fragrance of love and life. Like Judas, I would have objected – or at least run outside gasping for air. Which, come to think of it, is sort of what Judas was doing, this thief who cared nothing for others, including the poor he professed to care for, but who in actuality was clinging with his last breath to the ways of this world and who, unlike Mary, was incapable of seeing either the necessity of Jesus' impending death or what this death would mean for this world that God so loves.

3. Judas fails to see that the way to true life – a life free from the power of sin and the power of death – is a way that must go through death. This world, in its sin and selfishness, must be put to death. This is not so much because we are worthy of punishment, although that is certainly true. No, it is because we are already dead in sin, pretend as we might otherwise. And the only way to stop being dead is to die; to die to death and, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, be reborn as children of God and inheritors of eternal life. To stop being dead, we must die and let God get on with the business of raising the dead, of overcoming the stench of the grave with the overwhelming fragrance of life, abundant and eternal, that comes only through Jesus. This Jesus must die and live so that we can stop being dead and be reborn. Mary understands this; in her awesome gift to Jesus she shows her understanding of this. Her act is both worship and preparation; worship of the One who in dying will raise us and preparation of this One by anointing him for the death that is to come.
4. We would prefer it to be otherwise, of course. We would like to imagine that things really aren't so bad, that we don't need a Savior so much as we just need to do a little better, give a little more money to the poor, whatever. But

- even if Judas's objections came from a place of honest concern for the poor and downtrodden of this world, he would still be missing the point. We don't make the world a better place by trying a little bit harder to do so, and we don't avoid the power of death by ignoring the strength of its stench. Because no matter our motives, good though they may be, the harder we cling to this life the more we will inevitably become wrapped up in ourselves and our self-preservation. But in accepting the reality of death, we embrace the power of life – including especially the lives of the poor and downtrodden that we profess to care for yet whose lives are still, to us, worth less than our own. No, like Mary, we have to focus on Jesus, whose death is our only hope.
5. Several years ago, the comedian Mike DeStefano gave an interview about the first and last time he gave his wife, Fran, a ride on his Harley. She was in hospice care at the time, a former prostitute dying of AIDS. Against the judgment of his own sanity, he, HIV-positive and wildly in love with his wife, gave into Fran's request to take her on a motorcycle ride. She got on, dressed in a hospital gown and gripping the IV stand that gave her the much-needed relief of the morphine drip, and off they went. Why? Because those are the things you do when you are running out of time but have not yet reached the end; it's the sort of thing you do when you're alive, death be damned. Mike told the interviewer, "She just wanted to know that I still needed her, that I loved her, you know what I mean? (Dying) people, they feel, 'I'm alive.' They pass away at one moment. Until that moment, they are alive, and they want to be loved, and they want to give and share, you know."
 6. This is what Mary understood and what Judas never would – that we need to cling to Jesus while we can, keeping our focus always on him. Jesus was on his way to death; his hour was come and there was no avoiding it and no use pretending otherwise. Why not break out the extravagant perfume and fill the house with it? But what even Mary could probably not yet see was that not only was Jesus heading toward crucifixion, he was also on his way to

resurrection and ascension – that his death would transform our dying and that his rising would set us free forever.

7. There is no path to a better world, no hope for the poor, no end to racism or sexism, to hate and to oppression, to war and to woe, that we can find on our own. We are just too broken, too willfully trapped in the ways of sin and death, to do much about it. But we can cling to Jesus. We can worship Jesus. We can make extravagant offerings to Jesus. And in so doing, we can find the Kingdom of God and begin to glimpse it even here on earth. Our efforts will always fail when they are focused on us; when we focus on Jesus, we are set free to actually serve and care for others. When we admit that we are dead, we can finally begin to live. When we bow down at Jesus' feet, we can hear that the best way to worship Jesus is to kneel in loving service at the feet of others. It is he, who through his body anointed by Mary, becomes bread for this world. It is he, the One anointed to die, who anoints us with healing and hope and the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is Jesus, at the center of it all, who dies so that we can live. As we move next week into Holy Week, forget yourself. Give up on your own ideas. Kneel at the feet of your King, you who are dead in your own sin but alive in him. Stop pretending that death can be avoided – either Jesus' death or your own – and remember instead that death has been dealt with. It is a past fact, not a future to fear. The death of Jesus has filled this world with the overpowering fragrance of God's extravagant gift of life. May it overcome you. May it fill you. May you worship Jesus, and live. Amen.

And now may the peace which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.