

Sermon John 12: 1-8

5th Sunday in Lent

April 6th, 2025

We have been given 5 senses: sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. If you had to rank these senses according to their importance, what would come first? Second? Third? Fourth? Last?

Now sight, sound, and, to a lesser degree, touch are important to grasp the world, mostly on an intellectual level. Someone who is 'sense-ible' uses mostly their eyes and ears – and brain – to process what's going on.

Taste and smell may seem to us like less important senses – nice to have, of course, but do we really grasp the world through taste and smell? Maybe we don't rely on these senses that much anymore in our day and age, but for our ancient ancestors, taste and smell were crucial in the determination as to whether a food was safe to eat. And we benefit from these senses to this day – when something smells or tastes off, we instinctively know to better not eat it. And if we smell something rotten, our stomachs revolt, we get nauseated without us having to take a single bite. What a great survival mechanism!

And did anyone here have COVID at some point and lost their senses of taste and smell? How was that? My experience was that I was hungry, but I just didn't have any appetite – because I couldn't taste anything. And the loss of smell affects our appetite as well – because our whole eating experience already starts before we take our first bite: our olfactory nerves (the nerves leading from the nose to the brain) prepare us for the feast to come. Eating without smelling just isn't the same satisfactory experience. Just try to eat something as you pinch your nose.

The point I'm trying to make is: the sense of smell is much more important than we might think. Scientists have pointed out that smell in fact may be the most powerful of all our senses – because, more than the other senses, it triggers memories, sometimes memories that are buried deep in the subconscious regions of our brain. Like the memory of what is safe to eat – and what isn't. When we smell certain things, all of a sudden all the floodgates open, bringing back things long forgotten, some good – and some not so good. I catch a whiff of Mexican food as I walk down Main Street in Riverhead and remember not only what delicious food I had at Mexican restaurants in the past, especially in California – you can't beat Californian Mexican food - but also with whom I shared those

meals, the fellowship, the reason why we came together, the conversations around the table, the laughter. On the other hand, I remember how I couldn't stand Mexican food – not even the smell of it – when I was pregnant with my daughter. I smell evergreens and am reminded of many Christmas celebrations at home and in church. I smell pine needles in the summer and am reminded of a certain lake we used to go in the summer when I was a kid, which was surrounded by pine trees. I step into a hospital and am reminded of people I visited in a hospital in the past.

In today's gospel story, it is the day before Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, 6 days before the Passover meal, 7 days before Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus and his disciples are staying at the house of Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha in Bethany, less than 2 miles from the Eastern city walls of Jerusalem. Martha is in the kitchen, preparing a meal with her servants. The men are gathered in the largest room of the house, talking, laughing. We *heard* what happens next when I just read the story. Maybe you read along and *saw* the words. But I think we ought to smell what happens next as well. (Go around with nard.)

This is spike nard oil, a very aromatic essence made from the rhizomes, or root stems, of a flowering plant of the honeysuckle family which grows in the Himalayas (thanks, Wikipedia!). It is the same fragrance we hear about in today's gospel story. It's still expensive today, but back then, when Mary used it, it was one of the most precious things money could buy – it cost as much as a laborer earned in a year!

A member of a church I served previously gifted some spike nard to me (show). You see how tiny this bottle is, and you've smelled how intense the fragrance is. Now imagine a whole pound of this stuff, poured out over Jesus' feet in a fairly small house. It overpowers the kitchen smells. It overpowers the 'aroma' of unwashed bodies. In fact, it's an assault on the olfactory nerves.

And I can imagine that everyone stops in their tracks as they smell the nard. The chatter stops. Martha and the servants drop their utensils.

For them, this overwhelming scent may have triggered some very specific memories. Maybe memories of a wedding – bride and groom would be perfumed with nard when they got married. Maybe memories of a burial – those who could afford it would embalm their dead with the essence of nard. Nard was one of the perfumes used when a king or priest was anointed. The scent of the nard would have reminded all who smelled it of a very special occasion, of joy, celebration – but sorrow as well.

I am certain the scent of the nard opens the floodgates of the subconscious for the people witnessing the anointing of Jesus. And I can imagine that they are confused: what in the world is happening here? Why is this happening? What does it mean?

Mary's act of anointing Jesus is highly symbolic – she is performing a sign, as John the Evangelist would call it. By her bold and loving action, she declares: this is the Messiah – and Messiah means nothing else but 'the anointed one'. And the word 'Christ' means 'anointed', as well. By anointing him, making him the Messiah and Christ, Mary acknowledges Jesus as king, she acknowledges him as the bridegroom who invites all to the heavenly feast – but then, her action also foreshadows his death, which, at this point, is imminent.

Mary is making a point. A point that will be hard to hide – covered in a whole pound of nard, Jesus will carry that scent – that intense scent that cannot be ignored – for days. This doesn't just wash off! It will draw, it will command attention.

I can imagine that all this makes the disciples very uneasy. They know how precarious the situation is. They know Herod and the temple authorities in Jerusalem are ganging up on Jesus. I can imagine that they want to keep a low profile, and not stir up anything. And here is Mary, dousing Jesus in a pound of nard, just a day before they enter Jerusalem! Anyone encountering Jesus on the way to Jerusalem, everyone in Jerusalem, will stop in their tracks. They will know that something special, something extraordinary is going on.

But that's, of course, what Jesus wants. People will not only *see* Jesus, the Christ, the bridegroom, the King, riding into Jerusalem – they will smell Jesus, the Christ, the bridegroom, the King, riding into Jerusalem.

Jesus *wants* to draw attention – and not only to himself, but the one who sent him. A God who hears the cries of the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed. A God envisioning justice and peace for all creation. A God who doesn't coerce people into submission and obedience, but a God who beckons, like a lover. A God who loves us with passion – and it is a love so deep that God sacrifices God-self for the sake of all creation. A God whose rule is so different from anything we experience here on earth.

It's a prodigal God, a God who lavishes love on us and everybody, to the point of being wasteful. Mary's more than generous use of the precious nard in a gesture of

utmost love and dedication signifies this as well. Is it a sensible gesture? Does it make any sense? No, not really. Is it heart-felt and genuine? Indeed.

And I think the story of Mary anointing, dousing Jesus with this ridiculous amount of precious perfume, is a reminder for all of us: firstly, to savor and appreciate the things that are not necessarily sense-ible, like the scent of good food, or a rose, or a precious perfume; the sight of a beautiful sunset, a rainbow, or a beautiful piece of art; the sound of a songbird or our favorite song or a little child laughing; sharing the company of people we love. These are all things that, on the surface, are useless, that cannot be measured, no economic value can be attached to them - and yet they feed our soul and are precious beyond measure. At the end of the day – at the end of our days – we won't care about how loaded our bank accounts us, but rather who is there with us and cares about us. We will care about all the precious moments and memories that fill our hearts and soul.

Secondly, Mary's senseless act of love is a reminder for us to be generous, as well – generous with our love, our compassion, our mercy, our forgiveness, even if it doesn't seem to make any sense, even if it seems to be wasted. And in doing so, we point at Christ – whose love and willingness to die for us doesn't make any sense at all. But in the end, it's the seemingly senseless stuff that counts the most. Amen