

August 18, 2019

TEXT: [2 Corinthians 2:12–17 \(also Sirach 24:1, 13–22\)](#)

TITLE: *Fragrant Wisdom*

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Christian faith is always expressed through analogies and metaphors. This is necessary because faith involves things too big and too wonderful to be captured in mundane words the way that we write down items on a grocery list. I'm sure you've forgotten your grocery lists from last month. But some things in your life you can remember as clear as day, even though they happened years and years ago. That's the type of experience and deep memory faith is built upon.

In 2 Corinthians 2:14, the apostle Paul talks about this living, memorable faith using an analogy and a metaphor. He said: *Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him.* Being a follower of Christ is like being with him in a triumphant parade, walking down the street in a procession that brings joy and hope to those who see us pass by. That's a lovely analogy, but then Paul adds on a metaphor. Following Christ is not just like being in a parade; it is also like being the source of a wonderful fragrance—a perfume, an aroma that spreads out from us into the world, bringing joy and peace and life.

Fragrance—aroma. The sense of smell is actually one of the most important of our five senses. Our olfactory sense may not be as developed as that of a cat or dog, but we can detect about 10,000 different odors. Smell is tied to our sense of taste; it affects up to 80% of the flavors we taste. Smell has played an important part in our evolutionary history. We get warnings from the smell of smoke or of rotten food. In the same way, smell is strongly linked with our memories. A certain fragrance can trigger parts of our brain and evoke an emotional response. That's why so many products have added scents, so that you will associate happiness with a particular brand of soap, dryer sheets, or detergent.

Fragrance has been an important part of Jewish and Christian faiths from the very beginning. If you're on earth and you want to connect with the God of the highest heavens, you could write something down or do a dance or sing a song, but those responses don't travel very far. But if you burn an offering, the smoke would ascend to the sky and surely be pleasing to the Lord. That type of ritual was something Paul had experienced—and with which the early Christians were quite familiar: sending up fragrances as offerings to God. But Paul wants us to go a step further and to imagine ourselves as “fragrances of Christ” literally moving through the world and changing lives by the grace of God.

The other reading we heard this morning was from the book of Sirach. It too used metaphors to express its message. It first asks us to imagine that God's wisdom is a holy woman—a woman of stature, beauty and strength. Then the passage goes on and likens this woman to tall trees and fragrant plants. It says:

I took root in the midst of my people...I grew tall like a cedar of Lebanon, like a cypress or palm tree. I gave forth perfume like cassia and myrrh, like the aroma of incense in the holy places. I spread out my branches; I put forth buds of delights and blossoms of glorious fruit. It's a beautiful metaphor—this image of wisdom being a tall, stately tree and as near to us as the smell of perfume and budding flowers close by. Again, if we link the words of Sirach with the writing of Paul, the message comes to us that we are to be guided by Lady Wisdom's knowledge and integrity—and we are to be fragrances of Christ, filling every space we inhabit with what is true and noble and just.

Now why is this important? Let's talk for a moment about a difficult topic, namely, how change happens in this world. There is a flawed wisdom that insists change only comes about through power. Might makes right. Force beats diplomacy. It's all survival of the fittest, eat or be eaten. We Christians may claim to follow the Prince of Peace, but far too often we lay our offerings at the feet of the gods of War. During the latter years of President Obama's term of office, U.S. military spending actually decreased as we wound down the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But since 2016, U.S. military spending has increased from \$585 to \$750 billion dollars, with significant increases included in the congressional budget recently passed with bipartisan accord.

We have accepted a false narrative that all of life is a chess match—and in order to win, you need the most weapons and the biggest guns. So we sign off on huge expenditures benefiting the military industrial complex, while our roads, bridges, schools and clinics are crumbling and underfunded—while working parents have no affordable options for childcare—while social workers, school teachers and public defenders are burning out under unmanageable caseloads and miserly paychecks—while children suffer, addicts lack treatment, and working immigrants are rounded up like felons. This type of unholy behavior fits with Paul's metaphor of something that reeks with the "stench of death," not something which has the fragrance of life associated with God's justice and Christ's mercy.

We are not playing a "winner take all" chess game. We live in an interconnected world—a web that connects us across borders. How energy is used here and in China matters. How food is wasted here or grown in Malawi matters. How fresh water is either protected or polluted matters globally. Every day we are either adding to a fragrance of life or a stench of death. It's as simple as that.

So what can we do? Well, stay with Paul's metaphor a bit more. Think of a smell or fragrance that is lodged in your memory and brings you joy: Maybe it's the smell of a pine Christmas tree. The smell of turkey, ham, and potatoes being cooked for a Thanksgiving meal. The fragrance of a loved one's perfume that she always wore. Having grown up on a farm, the smell of freshly cut hay, especially alfalfa, is a distinctive smell that always takes me back to childhood—to tractors and barns and feeding cattle. That work may have been hard, but I'm grateful for that memory. What's a powerful fragrance that triggers memories for you?

Now think about the power of that memory as you consider the good news of the gospel. This world was never meant to be a battlefield—a place of war games, of

might makes right mentalities. You can build walls—you can lock the doors on prisons and penitentiaries—but something as simple as a smell, a fragrance or aroma has the power to seep into wherever you've barricaded yourself. Even if it's a corporate office with the air thick with greed—an army Situation Room claustrophobic with aggression—a White House office musty with testosterone and narcissism—all can be pervaded with a different fragrance. All can replace their stench of death with fragrances of life.

God has never accepted our limitations. Scripture says “the Spirit blows where it wills; you don't know where it comes from or where it goes. (John 3:8). Christ never let himself be hemmed in by this world's false understanding of power—even the power and authority of death. Jesus had them open the tomb that contained Lazarus, even though he'd been warned there would be a bad odor. He called forth Lazarus and replaced the stench of the tomb with a powerful wind of new life. And in his own life, the stone that would have confined him to defeat—to Roman power and human fearfulness—that stone was rolled away. The fragrance of resurrection spread out on the cemetery breezes that Easter morning, blowing over Mary Magdalene, seeping into the upper room where the frightened disciples were huddled, mingling with the smell of broken bread at the table in the house in Emmaus. The essence of God is more powerful than anything we humans can create or build or stockpile. It is this fragrance of God that by grace moves through us—changing us from death to life, from being people of despair to being beloved communities of hope. And that is the aroma, the fragrance, we are called to bear into the world in Christ's name.

Who we are and what we value emanates from us in every encounter we have with others. Do we seem to be a person who is friendly, trustworthy, rejoices in what is right, seeks to stand on the side of justice and peace and hope? In a metaphorical yet real way, this quality of ours is like a fragrance filling every room we enter. And though it is intangible and unseen, it is very real and it is part of God's way of counteracting what is fearful and unjust in this world. How did Paul put it? *Through us there spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing Christ.*

So inhale and exhale. Fragrances touch our memories and have the power to remind us what really matters in this life. Be the fragrance of Christ in the world. Choose today whom you will serve: weapons, walls, and the false wisdom of this world or God our Creator, revealed in Lady Wisdom who stands like a towering tree, God the Holy Spirit that blows where it will and connects all life with fragrances of hope, God the humble Savior who is bread, water, light and resurrection life for us and all humankind. Inhale and exhale; and be the fragrance of Christ beginning today.

AMEN