

PROPER FIFTEEN, PENTECOST 13, YEAR B, AUGUST 18, 2024

Our sense of smell is perhaps one of the most powerful of all our senses. It is amazing what smells can physically do to a person. You can actually reel from certain smells like bleach, or subway smells or rotting food or you can be lulled by other smells like lavender and chamomile that calm you. Smells can assault us both positively and negatively.

The other fascinating piece about our sense of smell is that it is connected to our memory bank. Smells, more than sounds, more than sights, more than touches, transport our minds and bodies back in time to an imprinted memory. I can smell the odor of yeast rising and it reminds me of sitting in my neighbors kitchen watching her bake every week everything from bread to streusel cake and other delicacies. What smells bring back memories for you? Maybe it is the smell of seaweed at the beach, or apples being baked or stinky socks remind you of locker rooms. Whatever it is our sense of smell is a powerful communicator to our inner being.

In the days of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, burnt offerings were the norm — small birds, lambs, calves, grains — all were sacrificed and burned. Burnt sacrifice was offered to appease God over the sins the people of Israel had committed. In the Old Testament lesson this morning we read about Solomon offering a thousand burnt offerings to God.

As the smoke rose in the Temple it must have been a delightful barbecue aroma: Roasted meats, roasted grains, aromatic oils, sweet smoke. No wonder all those sacrifices were referred to by the priests as “fragrant.” The aroma around the Temple in Jerusalem must have been like being at a barbecue cook-off. Daily sacrifices, quarterly commitments, yearly sacrifices — all were offered to stay on the “good side” of God. Can you imagine how expensive and exhaustive the tradition of temple sacrifices had become?

But with Jesus everything changed. The community of faith that came into being after the resurrection was not based upon plant and animal sacrifices. With Jesus’ resurrection the perpetual need for seeking divine appeasement was overcome. The only requirement now was to continue to embody Christ’s presence in this world which Len Sweet the former Dean of Drew Seminary calls the aroma of Christ in the world.

In the past several weeks we have been reading from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians’ where he describes what a community of faith, a true Aroma of Christ Church, might look and smell like. No lies, no evilness, no bitterness, no wrath or anger or wrangling. Think about that for a moment. No lies, only truth. No hate, only love. No condemnation, only forgiveness and love. An Aroma of Christ is a reflection of God forgiving, loving, and open to everyone.

Think about how much we spend every year trying to drown out our own body odors or drown ourselves in some new “sexy” fragrance? There is only one odor Christians are called to carry — that is the “fragrance” of Christ — the beautiful, life-affirming, God-forgiving essential essence of divine love and forgiveness.

But today’s text is not just about the sweet smell of Christ’s forgiving fragrance. It is also about how the community of faith takes that smell into the world. The smell goes by another name too: which is found in both today’s Old Testament lesson and the letter to the Ephesians and that is wisdom. The wisdom that Solomon asked God for was so

he could discern good from evil and have an understanding mind in governing his people.

That is what is behind Paul's message to the people of Ephesus. "Be careful how you live," Paul says to them. "Live not as unwise people but as wise." In every age we must decide how we will live. We must decide what is life giving, what is worth putting time and energy and talent into. Paul is writing to a community not unlike our own. They lived with many choices. It was a city with a fascinating and varied life. One could be drawn into its sophistication, its affluence, its commerce, its cosmopolitanism. Paul is asking them to make good choices for themselves as Christians in a secular society. He is not condemning the society in which they live. He is just telling them that life can be wasted on unworthy purposes, or it can be lived creatively and triumphantly. We can put God on a shelf, or we can make God central in our lives. We can let the smell of Christ permeate through us or not.

In a way this is what Jesus is saying about himself in today's Gospel as he calls himself the Bread of Life. We have all heard the expression "You are what you eat." Think of Jesus' words in these terms. What is it that we feed on every day? What is our diet like? What choices do we make from the tables that are spread before us? What flavors are we ingesting?

Too often it seems people who should know better - and that includes me - feed on the food that creates worry and anxiety, fear, selfishness and intolerance, hatred and despair.

You are what you eat and if your only bread is the bread of envy and fear and your only drink is the drink of bitterness and hatred you become these things. A little junk food doesn't hurt a person; most of us - but not all of us - can safely consume potato chips and candy, hot dogs and soda, pizza and chocolate bars - but - if we don't balance this all out in the other direction of fruit and vegetables, milk and eggs, water and meat, then our health will begin to fail, and we will suffer problems that we do not need to suffer.

Throughout the scriptures God's word - first the spoken and then the written word, and finally Jesus Christ, are compared to food - to bread - to drink - because in them there is life and through them comes life, a full and abundant and rich life.

This is the fragrance of Christ. Look at what Paul says the church is to be in Corinthians? "For we are to God a sweet smell of Christ". In fact, is there any higher compliment to a person than this one: "I smell Jesus in you." The smell of Jesus is all encompassing love and forgiveness. The repercussions of love and forgiveness are life-changing and world-changing.

Some people like to douse themselves in perfume or cologne to hide smells. But the truth is that just a little aroma of Christ has transformative properties. In meteorological circles there is a technical term called "near calm." "Near calm" is when there is only one mile per hour of wind recorded. "Near calm" describes a breeze that is just enough to bend a blade of grass. One mile per hour is about what you generate at a slow walk. It appears to be a pretty insignificant amount of wind.

However, just a tiny amount of "near calm," just a tiny dab of love and forgiveness in someone's life, can create huge changes. The aromas of Christ offered by a small community of faith can have massive consequences. The world can be

changed by a one mile an hour wind of love and compassion and forgiveness. An Aroma of Christ has the power to bend the trajectory of history.

We have only to breathe deep of the fragrance of Christ, and exhale that sweet smell upon the world. The power for living the Christian life does not come from external rules and regulations, restrictions and moralism. Rather it comes from Christ living in us. As Jesus becomes the Bread of Life for us, we then become the Bread of Life to those around us. We become the aroma of Christ in the world. So embrace the smell of Jesus' love, forgiveness and compassion which is a life giving gift beyond what we can ever imagine that we can receive and can give. Amen