

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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It's a cold November night in 1959 and Roger is just one of hundreds of people exiting the Music Box movie theatre on N. Southport Ave. He had gone to the movies by himself this time, he couldn't quite convince his friends to go see all three and a half hours of Ben-Hur again, for the fifth time. Roger enjoyed the fact that his ticket purchases had contributed to Ben-Hur being the fastest grossing movie of all time, heck it even made him in a crazy way, and he knew it was crazy, feel proud, as if he was a part of something bigger than himself. Ben-Hur was like no other movie he had ever seen. Its 15 million dollar budget far surpassed any other movies. I mean the chariot race alone cost 1 million dollars to make and the life size 18 acre track, which was historically accurate to the 1st century, was the largest film set ever built. Roger couldn't fathom a movie experience to top this one. Well until he saw it.

Outside of the theater, just north of the main entrance, huddled between two other movie posters, on a red background, in yellow script, were these words: "First (1893) They Moved; Then (1927) They Talked; Now (1959) They Smell" Michael Todd Jr. Presents *Scent of Mystery* in glorious, [that's right] Smell-O-

Vision, the Process to End all Processes, the movie poster read. There it was, right in front of him, this was the future of cinema, of human experience. Imagine if Ben-Hur had Smell-O-Vision. How much better would the chariot race be if you could smell the grit, the adrenaline, the fresh Mediterranean air? Maybe, just maybe, at the end of Ben-Hur, when Jesus shows up, you could even catch a whiff of the Messiah, smell the grace, as he ascends to his place of death upon the cross.

Roger had to wait until February 1960 to see *Scent of Mystery*, and he was lucky because there were only three theaters across the nation that were equipped with Smell-O-Vision and one happened to be in Chicago. But when he actually went to see it, the let down crushed him. There was an annoying hissing noise each time an aroma, made to match what was going on in the movie, was released. Roger could only afford the cheap ticket in the balcony, and it took longer for the smell to get up to him, several seconds after the action happened on the screen. And to top off this lousy experience there was the constant sound of people sniffing loudly throughout the movie.

Scent of Mystery was not the revolution Roger or producer Michael Todd Jr. hoped it would be in 1960, and Smell-O-Vision never took off. On the one hand the whole premise of pumping fake smell into a movie theater to

accentuate fresh bread coming out of the oven in a movie seems kind of lame, but on the other, and maybe I'm crazy, but the appeal isn't totally lost on me. Smell can be a really powerful component of any human experience. It is said that smell is integrally tied to memory, even more than sight or taste or the other senses, smell can immediately transport us to a different time, a different place. A real sense of smell is what we are missing that could really help us experience today's Gospel reading for the 5th Sunday in Lent. Today we heard the story of Mary, the sister of Lazarus, the one whom Jesus raised from the dead, anointing Jesus' feet with a pound of perfume, of costly pure nard. All of that perfume poured out on Jesus' feet, 300 denarii worth, enough money to equal a full year's wages of a working class individual. That is a lot of perfume. The smell must have been overwhelming. Our text says that the whole house was filled with the fragrance. But we are not talking about your suburban five bedroom, three and a half bath, two-car garage house. Typical houses in ancient Judah would have been small, with low roofs, and no extra room. A pound of nard would have filled every nook and cranny of that space. The aroma would have saturated the clothes of everyone there for dinner down to the skin.

A Smell-O-Vision production of this scene would make for a very overwhelming movie going experience. Hisssssssss, Hissssss, clouds of perfume scent would waft into the theater. We would close our noses in the hopes of dulling the smell and try to breathe through our mouths. But we would still be able to smell it, the smell would be thick as if we could take a bite of the air and chew the smell. But then we realize that although we are soaked with this smell, like those in the room with Jesus and Mary, it is not an unpleasant experience. In fact, it is quite the opposite. The smell we smell all around us is the smell of love, of Mary's extravagant love for her friend, for her Lord. It is this love that overwhelms her to throw aside all sense of convention and modesty and use her long hair to wipe Jesus' feet. This is a moment of grace, a moment which foreshadows Jesus wiping the feet of the disciples, a true act of servant hood, before his arrest. Mary is the beloved disciple and she is honoring her Messiah, which in Hebrew literally means the anointed one, a designation reserved for kings and royalty.

But despite this overwhelming smell of love and grace there is another smell in the room. Smell-O-Vision goes hissss one more. This smell is fainter, it takes more than a couple seconds to creep up to the balcony seats, and at first it is hard to place, insidious in its approach, but an unmistakable smell which

stands in stark contrast to the perfume. The second smell in this scene is the smell of death.

Death is the uninvited guest in this room. As potent as the smell of love, and grace, and life is in this room and in our lives, there is still sin and death. Just as we are saints and justified in the eyes of God, we are still sinners who as St. Paul says, “do not do the good we want to do, and practice the evil that we do not want to do.”

Where is the smell of death in this story? Well Jesus and his disciples have gathered in the house of Lazarus to dine that evening. This is the same Lazarus who had just been raised from death itself in the chapter right before this story and is now sitting beside Jesus and Mary. Lazarus who was in the tomb for four days and whose body the people said had already begun to stink is sitting in this house filled with the fragrance of love and grace.

Where is the smell of death in this story? Our story tells us that Judas Iscariot is there too. This is Judas, the one who will betray Jesus, who will hand Jesus over to die, who cannot bear to witness Mary’s act of devotion and love and therefore speaks out to interrupt and draw attention away from this moment of grace. “Shouldn’t we have sold this perfume and given it to the poor?” he says. But Judas’ insincerity, since he would often steal the money from the common purse, escapes no one including Jesus.

Where is the smell of death in this story? While Mary is perfuming Jesus the Messiah, the anointed one, she is also, our text says, anointing a corpse. Our text says that Mary bought this perfume to keep it for the day of Jesus' burial. Mary anoints Jesus so that this beautiful scent will stand in contrast to the ugly humiliating death of Jesus' crucifixion. Yes brothers and sisters, the smell of death is in the room.

Take a good whiff. Can you smell it? Politicians mimic Judas' insincerity, pandering to us by promising that they will fix the world but who are committed to establishing their own power and reinforcing the already powerful. We are told that money and things give us life but fail to see that our greed is killing the earth and exploiting the poor. But even in a world where the smell of sin and death and hate, insidious and diffuse as it is, creeps its way into our lives, into our city, the smell of life, of love and grace, still like a pound of perfume saturates our very being and binds our lives to God and to all of God's creation.

After all, it was Jesus who did not heed the warning that Lazarus had already started to smell like death and instead raised him from the dead, breathing life back into his friend.

After all, even when Judas attempts to chastise this act of love on Mary's part, trying to call her actions misguided, Jesus reminds him of the road to life. In the face of Judas' rebuke Jesus quotes the Hebrew Scriptures saying the "poor will always be with you." And while some may even try to coopt this line and try to give it back to death by saying that this quote means that it is pointless to help the poor, they should really read the rest of the quote from Deuteronomy 15:11. For it says, "the poor will always be with you. Therefore I, the Lord command you to open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land." The odor of death is the stench of scarcity, that there isn't enough to go around, that helping is pointless, that God only has enough love for some self-selected people. The aroma of grace is the smell of God's love for all and our love for each other.

After all, it is Mary who while recognizing that even though Jesus will die, with a death that will seem to win on Good Friday, still chooses to embody the extravagant love of God with her actions and allows the aroma of grace to cover everyone and everything. Let us, with the help of God's love and grace, seek to do the same.

Amen