

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
John 12:1-8 *What Love Smells Like*

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This is the perfume I put on before going to bed at night. I was standing in the fragrance section of the Marks and Spencer on High Street in Oxford, England the first time I smelled it back in July of 2011. Lifting the bottle from the glossy glass display shelf, I pressed the top, watching with satisfaction as a small cloud of mist filled the air. I took a tentative inhalation of the scent. Sensing that I liked it, I stepped into the mist, breathing more deeply. I was delighted. “Ooo, it smells orangey” I thought. Or, as it states on the website of the Bronnelly of England company that manufactures the perfume, the “fruity and enthralling fragrance with bitter sweet top notes of tangy orange and mandarin, that yields to a floral heart of jasmine and lily, on top of a sweet musky base.” The company calls it *Orange and Jasmine au de toilette*. I call it “What Confidence Smells Likes” and I am reminded of what confidence smells like every night when I walk through a spritz *Orange and Jasmine au de toilette* on my way to bed.

Rudyard Kipling wrote "Smells are surer than sounds or sights / To make your heart-strings crack." And indeed, all these years and miles later, just the slightest hint of the smell of the perfume takes me right back to that moment in Oxford . . . I was traveling alone just days after my painful divorce had been finalized. The day before I left for the trip I had buried my dear friend Conway. Here at the church we had just finished a renovation project that went beautifully but it was a stressful time none the less. And, on top of all of that, when I returned home from the trip, I would be a full-time single parent. It was a daunting time in my life.

And yet, as I stood there in the Marks and Spencer inhaling the *tangy orange and mandarin yielding to a floral heart of jasmine and lily*, I stopped to think of all that had happened over the course of the past year—the good and the bad. I thought how amazing it was that I was even in England, one of my most favorite places EVER, on this trip that was a staggeringly generous gift from an acquaintance who wished to do something kind for me in the wake of a difficult time.

And with those thoughts swirling in my head and myriad feelings competing for space in my heart, I bought the perfume to remind me of that moment—to remind me how much God had gotten me through and that God would get me through whatever it was that awaited me when I got home and, in the end, even though it may not have seemed like it in that moment, in the end, through God’s amazing grace, everything really would be okay.

I wear my perfume at night instead of during the day because a lot of us here at the church are sensitive to fragrances. People being able to worship without developing a massive headache or debilitating asthma attack is far more important than me enjoying “my fragrance of confidence.” But hopefully, as you came in the door this morning you noticed a different scent, an aroma, if you will . . . would anyone like to guess what it is?

Right. Cinnamon rolls. The smell of freshly baked cinnamon rolls has wafted up from the church kitchen to permeate the spaces of our little church, filling it with the sweet smell of comfort food. I imagine that you noticed it when you first walked in the building.

Perhaps the disciples and other party guests Amy read to us about this morning would have had a similar sensory experience in this story from the Gospel of John. The enticing aroma of roasting lamb and the robust bouquet of wine the color of pomegranates would have had their mouths watering before they even reached the front stoop of the house. As they approached the door, guests would have heard the strains of music and the jumble of laughter and talking coming from this home where Lazarus, Mary, and Martha lived. Upon stepping through the door, their field of vision would have filled with the faces of old friends and neighbors.

They are all there because there’s a lot to celebrate. Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead a few days earlier. Had he not, they all would have been attending a funeral luncheon that day instead of a dinner party that night.

Jesus had saved them from their grief and misery and they were there to rejoice in their good fortune—to rejoice in the new life that Jesus brings.

And so they ate and they drank. Toasts were made. Perhaps they sang the ancient Middle Eastern version of “for he’s a jolly good fell-eh-low, who raised Lazarus from the grave.” It was a very grand celebration, indeed.

After dinner, things calmed down a bit as the satiated guests took to lounging around the house, visiting in small groups, carrying on quiet conversations in cozy corners. As they were thus relaxing, some noticed a new fragrance pushing away the tang of food and wine—a powerful and potent smell like that of a perfume filled the whole house. Looking around, the guests saw the discarded nard jar at Jesus’ feet. Mary was leaning over him, rubbing his feet with her hair. Some felt awkward in the presence of such intimacy, they turned their faces away out of respect for the sanctity of the moment the two were sharing. Others looked on at the two of them, basking in the warmth of the glow of such a love as that.

But then, the sanctity of that moment between Mary and Jesus, and all the quiet moments happening among those gathered in the house, was abruptly interrupted by a voice, dripping with judgment, inquiring, “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.”

At this, the party guests looked up at the disruption and looked to Jesus for his response. They hear truth in Judas’ statement and yet, how can such a beautiful testimony to the love shared between those two, how can Mary’s staggeringly generous gift, possibly be called into question? The guests wait with bated breath for Jesus to reply. Taking a deep breath he looked right at Judas saying, “Leave her alone. She has saved this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.”

The exchange cast a shadow over the events of the evening and the guests began to depart, returning to their homes as they wondered about what Jesus had said. This was not the first time he had talked about his death and they were beginning to grow concerned. Was he sick or something? Over the last few weeks it was like something had changed with him. He still had that light in his eyes but he was somehow more sober, more somber, kind of on edge. A few of his closest friends seemed the same way. It was strange—at this time of year people were usually growing more excited and had a bit of a spring in their step as they anticipated traveling to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Indeed, they’d be leaving to go there in less than a week. But Jesus, they weren’t sure what it was, but something about him had changed.

Over the course of the next few weeks, the party guests’ questions about Jesus would be answered. They would accompany him into Jerusalem to loud shouts of “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” They would sense the danger that continued to mount and some of them would even return home before Passover just to get out of the tension that had seized upon Jerusalem that year for Passover. Others of them would stick it out, only to have their hearts broken when all that Jesus had said about his impending death came to fruition. And, for just the very few who stuck it out until the very end so they could rub precious oils into the skin of their beloved friend, this time in a true act of embalming, they would experience the greatest moment of love the world has known when they discovered the tomb was empty and Christ was risen.

But no matter what any of those party guests experienced over the course of days and weeks after the party, they all had something in common. Whenever they walked past the perfume sellers stall at the market and caught a whiff of the fragrance of the perfume Mary had poured on Jesus’ feet that night, they were transported back to that moment. As their nostrils filled with the scent of the perfume, their hearts filled with the memory of Mary’s staggeringly generous gift . . . the gift of offering everything she had and everything she was to Jesus. From that night forth, whenever they caught a whiff of that perfume, they were reminded of what love smells like.