

What If We Didn't Stink?

A sermon based on 2 Corinthians 2:12-3:5

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

What's the most heavenly smell you can think of? Take a moment. I can see the smiles forming on your faces. What is it? A batch of chocolate chip cookies, fresh baked and out of the oven? The smell of the summer grass freshly mown? A baby just bathes, having that smell that only babies do? Sizzling bacon? Those are some of mine. What are yours?

Now, what if nothing smelled? If it was like everyone's noses were perpetually stuffed. What a bummer, right? Food would be boring...tasteless. Flower...bleh! On the plus side, no one would be able to tell when you needed a shower. Couldn't tell if you burnt your cookies. Wouldn't notice if that grass had been sitting out for some time and was starting to decompose. I'd think we'd all, agree, though, that without smells, life would literally stink.

Well, what if you didn't stink? Kind of an odd, maybe even off-putting question to begin my sermon with this morning, wouldn't you say? But I'm not accusing any of you of not showering this morning. I'm not even talking about an unpleasant smell. Rather, I'm talking about the endearing aroma of victory we get from Jesus' resurrection triumph. What if we didn't smell?

Did you notice it? Walking into church today, did you notice it? Maybe not quite as much as you would have on Easter Sunday. Because here, it smelled differently. And the scent was unmistakable. The front of church decorated with all those lilies...the beautiful tulips downstairs...you know what this church smelled like? It smelled like Easter. Friends, even more, it smelled like victory!

Didn't it? Because that's what we associate with those flowers. The color, and just as much, the smell remind us Jesus is alive. Both remind us of the eternal victory Jesus has won for us by his miraculous and glorious resurrection from the dead.

Well, in our verses this morning, the Apostle Paul alludes to this scent of victory. Do you see it? In verse 15, he says, "We are to God the aroma of Christ," and that includes everything about Jesus, his life, his death, his resurrection...his victory.

Can you smell it? I'm confident the Corinthians would have been able to as they read Paul's letter. Do you know why? Look at how he sets the scene for them. "Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ..." There's a word in that phrase that the Corinthians would've picked up on..."triumphal."

You see, the picture here is that of the "Roman Triumph," the special tribute Rome gave to their conquering generals. It was their equivalent of our "ticker-tape parade." If a commander in chief won a complete victory over the enemy on foreign soil, and if he killed at least 5,000 enemy soldiers and gained new territory for the Emperor, then that general was entitled to a Roman Triumph. The processional would include the commander riding in a golden chariot, surrounded by his officers. The conquerors would also parade a grand display of the spoils of battle, as well as the captive enemy soldiers.

The Roman priests would also participate, carrying burning incense to pay tribute to the victorious army. The procession would follow a special route through the city, a route lined with sweet-smelling flower petals, and it would end at the Circus Maximus where they would feast and watch as the helpless captives would provide entertainment by fighting wild beasts. It was a very special day in Rome when the citizens were treated to a full-scale “Roman Triumph.” What a feast this event was for the senses, their eyes, their ears, their mouths, their nostrils.

So, how does this piece of history apply to us today? Do you notice who Paul says is being lead in the triumph today? It’s us! And we’re not the captive enemies.

Jesus Christ, our great Commander in chief, came to foreign soil (this earth) and completely defeated the enemy (Satan). Instead of killing 5,000 persons, He gave life to more than 5,000 persons—to 3,000 plus at Pentecost and to another 2,000 plus shortly after Pentecost, and multitudes more leading up to today. Jesus Christ claimed the spoils of battle—lost souls who had been in bondage to sin and Satan. What a splendid victory!

Now, in the Roman Triumph, the victorious general’s sons would walk behind their father’s chariot, sharing in his victory; and that is where believers...where we are today—following in Christ’s triumph. We do not fight for victory; we fight from victory.

But you know what’s missing from this triumphal procession? The incense. The rose petals. The smell. But friends, it’s really not missing because it’s us. We are the incense. We are the rose petals. We are the aroma of Christ’s triumph over sin, death, and the devil.

Do you know what it means to be the aroma of Christ? It means our lives, what we say, what we do, does it give off the aroma of Christ. Is the fragrance of the knowledge of God, that is, the good news of the gospel, is it emanating from us? When others watch us and the way that we live, does it give off the sweet-smelling scent of Christ and his victory?

But what if we didn’t stink?

You see, so often we forget we’re marching with Christ in a triumphal procession. Instead of walking with the victors, we cut ranks and fall in line with those in the parade who are marching to their deaths. Instead of putting on the sweet smelling incense of victory, we drench ourselves with the odor of the world. We hide ourselves in the deep, dark, dank depths of our sin. We return to the stench of our filth and reek of death.

Do you know how we do this? We reek of death and defeat when we allow the garbage of sin to pile up in our lives. “Oh, I know I shouldn’t be telling lies at work, to my spouse, to my friends, but hey, beats telling the truth and getting into trouble. They’re harmless, anyways.” And the piles starts. “I just can’t help it. That person makes me so angry. It’s either just let the hateful feelings boil up inside of me or else I’ll just explode and let him have it.” Friends, that’s filth. “I don’t have anything nice to say about her – it’s the truth, but it’s not nice – but I’m still going to say it anyways.” And you spew forth garbage.

And friends, that’s just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the stinky garbage of sin in our lives. And every day, we keep adding to it.

But that’s not all. Most of all, we reek of sin and death when we hide our faith, refusing to let the aroma of Christ emanate in our lives, trying to blend in with the stank of the rest of the world. We could stand

out, be different, consistently smell like Jesus so that others can smell him, too, but who are we kidding? We can't. We don't.

And so, following Jesus as victors? Is that what we have earned or deserved for ourselves? You know, I picture us looking more like Pig-Pen from the Peanuts cartoon strip. You know, Charlie Brown's friend, who's always dirty, got this cloud of gnats and dust and grime surrounding him. That's us. Really, we belong way at the back of this triumph, with the rest of the dirty, stinky captives. Jesus ought to leave us shackled in our sins and have us executed at the end of His triumphal procession.

Again, Paul says, "We are...the aroma of Christ...Who is equal to such a task?" Who of us is really worthy or even up to the task of spreading the fragrance of the knowledge of Jesus and what he's done?

We all know the answer.

But wait! Look at that question again. "Who is equal to such a task?" The way Paul asks that question actually necessitates a "yes" answer. The question expects the answer... "We are!"

Why are we sufficient? We who are mere mortals? We who are ourselves stink of the dung and heaps of filth? We who reek with sin and stink with the stench of death? We are sufficient not because of ourselves but because we are part of the TRIUMPHAL procession. We follow in the VICTORY of Christ...a sweet-smelling victory that rose out of the garbage of sin and the dump of death.

The book of Ephesians encapsulates this victory: "Live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Jesus' life here on this earth, it was a fragrant offering to God...of perfection. Jesus didn't stink at life. His sinless life was the kind of sacrifice our lives should be, a pleasing sacrifice to God.

But you know what was even more pleasing to God? His sacrifice at the cross. Everything Jesus went through in his passion, his walk to the cross? It stunk. But nothing stunk more than Jesus on the cross, burdened with our sins, all of them, treated by man – and God – as the lowliest filth ever. But there, as he suffered the eternal pit of hell, he also destroyed our sins. There, on the cross, Jesus took away our stench and washed us clean. His resurrection proves it. On Easter, as Jesus rose from the grave, he was able to triumphantly parade all of his defeated enemies behind him, sin, Satan, and death.

That's what makes us sweet-smelling...we are participants in Jesus' triumph, his victory, his life, death, resurrection. Because of Jesus, because of his love, because of his grace, our pile of garbage...our stinky sins are gone. You see, the smell of grace to God is the sweet fragrance of Christ's sacrifice. And his sacrifice isn't just a perfume that masks the smell of our sins. It takes the stink of sin and death away for good.

That is what makes us sufficient. Now, we are that fragrance. Because we are the victors (just like last week's sermon assured us), we now exude Christ's victory in the way we live our lives. We are adequate, sufficient and competent because we follow Christ and emanate His aroma.

You know, Paul spends quite a few verses here talking about what makes us competent and sufficient to even have the privilege to be the aroma of Christ...to be ministers and proclaimers of the gospel, the fragrant message of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

It was a big deal in his day. There were false teachers out there, who knew they needed to supply so-called letters of recommendation when going from town to town just so that others would listen to their (false) message...their lies.

You know what Paul called them? People who “peddle the word of God for profit.” Literally, that word peddle means “to do shady business.” It can also mean “to adulterate.” To modernize the thought a bit, I translated it, “traffic” with the idea of dealing drugs in mind. Those who sell crack, meth and heroine do shady business and have no interest in the buyer. They only care about themselves. So many handle the Word of God that way. They want a prosperity and profitable Gospel for themselves...and who cares about anyone else, as long as I’m happy and comfortable. Can you think of people like that out there? Friends, there are “traffickers” out there! .

But that’s not who we are. Our “letter of recommendation” is Christ, and our message is free of charge. Our message smells the best because it’s the real deal. In fact, so closely are we identified with the gospel that we ourselves can be called the aroma of Christ, for we are the ones who bring the sweet-smelling gospel to others, as Paul says, to those who are being saved. But to those who “are perishing,” it’s the smell of death, not because we stink, not because our message stinks, but because to those who have rejected the gospel, those who are held captive in the triumph, still chained to their sins, the gospel reminds them of their own stench of death.

What if we didn’t stink? Friends, that’s kind of a misleading question. The truth is, we do stink, but not with the stench of our sins, not anymore. We stink not just because we wear, but because we are the aroma of Christ. We have the fragrant message of God’s grace to share. There are those who are still held captive by the stench of death. So, let’s go out there and stink with the triumphant victory of Christ. That message smells so sweet. That message saves. And literally, that’s the most heavenly smell!
Amen.