

Seeking empty
Philippians 3:4b-14 John 12:1-8

How do you “remember”? What process or events or activities trigger good memories for you?

It's easy to recognize memories bound up in collections of old pictures or photographs or maybe triggered by the melody of an old, familiar song. It could be a place or a view or some combination that tingles a long-forgotten moment or event.

Sometimes, it's a combination; dancing one more Scottish ceilidh, reminding me of all the dances before; standing at the top of a chairlift, looking out over the wonder and majesty of God's creation reminding me of the precious times I have been fortunate enough to look at a similar vista. These are memories that touch us in head, heart and soul.

Did you know that our sense of smell is also closely related to memory as well? A hint of perfume can evoke a lost memory of someone you haven't seen in years. A whiff of cleaning fluid can take you instantly back to a time in hospital. The smell of baking goods rising in the oven can bring you right back to a holiday when you were a child or to the presence of your grandmother.

I'll tell you a secret: When I was serving as a youth minister and we were constantly raising funds for our summer trips, I learned early on that we could make EVERY in church bake sale a success...as long as we baked one batch of chocolate chip cookies DURING the worship service and made sure the doors were open so the smell would drift in.

It's amazing how many people would stay and buy those cookies!

Smell can also cause other kinds of strong emotions. When I have worked with first responders after a disaster, they almost always reported that it is not the SIGHTS of a disaster scene that triggers the memories of past responses, but the SMELL. The brain seems to be able to deal with the sight, it has filters and intellect to help sort things out, but the smell goes right to the core of our being.

You'll have to trust me on this; there are some disaster scenes whose smell you will NEVER forget. And something similar, no matter where it is found, can trigger an entire dump of emotions and reactions.

Our story from the Gospel reading today is a story about a strong scent and strong emotions in the people who surround Jesus.

When we find Him, Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem where we know His story will end with the tragedy and the victory that He's been proclaiming all along. But first, Jesus stops at the home of some good friends.

We're familiar with the family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus from the encounters they've had with Jesus before - sibling struggles over work in the kitchen and Lazarus's being brought back to life by Jesus. These are people whose lives are intimately intertwined with that of the Master.

This time they are at the table once again, but the scent of good food is overcome by the strong stench of controversy as Mary breaks open an expensive vial of perfume and begins to use it to anoint Jesus' feet.

Judas strenuously objects, supposedly out of a sense of charity; the money for that perfume could have been given to the poor. This was unseemly, this was, simply, wrong!

Of course, we can never read any of Judas's story without thinking of its ending, and it's hard not to remember he was the treasurer, the keeper of the group monies and we can't help but be suspicious even as he feigns selfless motives...maybe he was selfless...maybe not.

But the deed was done, the vial was broken open and the perfume used to anoint the feet of Jesus.

I can't help but wonder what that perfume smelled like. Does sacrifice have a scent? Is there a unique aroma to the greatest loss we've ever known, a life given for the sake of gain for the whole world?

Mary pours out the treasure she has saved and wipes her Savior's feet, and He praises her actions. It's good to remember that in the next few days He will turn around and wash the feet of His disciples before pouring out His life for them and for us.

Oh, I know the arguments of far too many who will quote Jesus here saying “the poor will be with you always” as a means of justifying ignoring our social contract. But that is NOT the context of this story.

This is a story about anointing. This is a good time to pause and remember what “anointing” means.

Not only were the sick anointed for healing and the dead anointed for burial, but kings were anointed as a consecration to set them apart for leadership and authority. Anointing ALWAYS marked a significant point in life. The Christian sacrament of baptism is a kind of anointing. The sacrament of ordination is a form of anointing.

On this evening and at this time, Mary’s perfume absolutely WAS an anointing, an anointing that carried with it the scent of brokenness and death, but also, ironically, the scent of power, a King coming into His Kingdom.

This is the strange paradox of Jesus’ act of giving Himself for us and it is something that does not translate well into today’s world. But, for that matter, it probably didn’t translate all that well into His world, either.

What if, bear with me, but what if a bare life really IS a full life?

I know, that sounds like I’m going all “eastern mystical” on you but hang in there.

Everyone wants some “stuff” in their lives. Whether it is school, work, hobbies, holidays...you name it, and it’s there. But how often do we complain that there is too much going on? We talk about over-programmed kids and taxi-shuttle moms and an entire generation that uses every spare second to see what they have missed by checking in with their gsm.

By the way, tangent time (you knew this was coming!) I heard a teenager a few weeks ago bragging that they had more than 10,000 “friends”! I realized don’t know what that means. Which of these friends will be there if you end up in hospital? Which will be there to share when you graduate? How many of these friends are available to come and sit with you when it seems like the world is folding in on you? Whose shoulder will you cry on when you break up with your boyfriend? Who will go with you when you go looking for your first-ever prom dress? Just who ARE these friends?

I so wanted to shout to this young lady, “look up!” Experience the life that surrounds you! Have two or three life-time friends, not hundreds or thousands of “e-friends”!

What if your “full life” is an illusion? What if all that “stuff” does little more than hide the fact that you’ve confused “busy” with “meaningful”? What if a bare life really IS a full life? A life that allows you to not only “live” but to “be”, in all the wonder, splendor and grace that God has set aside for you?

It shouldn’t be surprising that EVERY Christian religious order includes designated times of “emptiness” ...times to allow the Holy Spirit to enter our lives...times to encounter Christ.

Does that sound a bit too mystical for you?

Do you remember our reading from Paul? After explaining why he could be considered the foremost leader of his time, he goes on to write:

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.
⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death. Not that I have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

This is the strange paradox of Jesus’ act of giving Himself for us that I mentioned a moment ago: an anointed King giving Himself for His people. Emptying Himself that His word might be fulfilled.

And telling us to do the same. Do you remember His words?
THIS is the strange paradox of Jesus’ act of giving Himself for us: anyone who wants to save his life will lose it, but anyone who loses his life will save it.

Sacrifice as victory, loss as gain: Do you (and I) dare to wear the same perfume as our Lord? In our overly full lives, in the busyness of daily life, work, school, activities...when we are with people, do they ever catch a hint of the scent of sacrifice on us? Does that perfume so lavishly, outrageously given by Mary still cling to our clothes as well?

Or are we so full of the world, so full of our busyness, so full of ourselves that
there is no longer any room for Christ,
no longer any room for understanding,
no longer any room for wonder,
no longer any room for awe,
no longer any room for grace?

My prayer for you is that you catch even the faintest whiff of the perfume of
the Anointed One...and be reminded of WHO and WHOSE you are.