

A Whiff of Notoriety

John 12:1-8

This is such a smelly story.

Feet, food, fragrance.

First, there's the smell of feet

—feet mind you, that walk around
in sandals on unpaved streets
and dusty yards.

Have you ever thought about
how dirty feet would have been
in the 1st century?

Then there's the smell of dinner

—what would they have eaten?

Warm bread dipped in olive oil and spices;
hummus with wild onions and garlic?

A stew of roasted meat and legumes?

No one can ignore the fragrance
of the moth ball smell
that lingers around Lazarus.

And finally the smell
of the perfumed oil...

This is a text meant to be
not just read, but experienced.

There are certain smells
that linger in our homes,
aren't there?

That bacon you fried for breakfast?

Or the sautéed garlic and onions
that went into the spaghetti sauce?

Those are foods I can smell
long after the pots and pans
have been cleaned...

they sometimes linger even
into the next day, don't they?

I love the smell of a charcoal grill
when it is warm enough—
like last week's Wednesday Night Supper scents,
of hamburgers and hot dogs.

Smells can take us places.
Step into an elementary school,
and suddenly you are in 1st grade all over again,
crayons, construction paper and rubber cement glue.
Smell is linked to memory and emotion.¹

Who can remember the smell
of your mother's perfume?
Or the way your grandmother's kitchen smelled?
What about the smell
of the wood shop your grandfather had?
And the smell of a clean baby
—oh it makes us wince with love and longing.

There's a chemistry to smell.
The perfume industry knows this well.
"In addition to [smell]
being the sense most closely linked to memory,
smell is also highly emotive.
The perfume industry is built around this connection,
with perfumers developing fragrances
that seek to convey a vast array of emotions and feelings;
from desire to power,
vitality to relaxation."²

Clive Christian makes one of the most
expensive perfumes in the world.³
Anyone wearing No. 1 Imperial Majesty this morning?
No?
Probably not...
because if you could afford
a perfume that is close to \$13,000 an ounce,

¹ <https://www.saga.co.uk/magazine/health-wellbeing/mind/how-smell-affects-your-body-and-mind>

² <http://www.fifthsense.org.uk/psychology-and-smell/>

³ <https://financesonline.com/7-most-expensive-perfumes-in-the-world-chanel-no-5-is-not-the-top-one/>

we'd need to talk with you
about upping your pledge.
While Mary's perfumed nard oil
is not quite **that** expensive,
it seems the best educated guess
is that it would have cost at least a year's wages
—which seems like an awful lot
to pour on someone's dusty feet,
even if he is the Messiah.

Mary's gift is as extravagant
and as it is generous.
It fills the house with its scent.
It covers the scent of dinner's figs and honey;
it covers the scent of 1st century feet and bodies;
it covers the scent Lazarus's recent resurrected-ness;
in short it, ***it overpowers everything in the house;
the perfume she brings
demands to be noticed and accounted for.***

In traditional terms,
the act of anointing is a set apart-ness.
It designates a divine specialness
or has holy use and importance.
Oil poured on the head,
meant the anointing a king.
That's what Samuel did for Saul
and Nathan then did for David.
So what does it mean to anoint the feet?
Jesus says it is to prepare him for his burial.

But how did Mary know?
Had she been listening
more closely than the male disciples;
so that she caught on
to what was going to happen
as Christ makes his way to Jerusalem?
In our story, we are within a week of Passover,
and the tensions are high.

Just days before, this story,
Martha, concerned for her brother,
sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was ill.

John makes sure to tell us,
that Jesus loved Martha, Mary and Lazarus
and even though he hears Lazarus is ill,
Jesus stays where he is two more days.

Lazarus dies and then he's buried.

When Jesus does finally make his way to Bethany,
Lazarus has been dead long enough
for the King James Bible to say that,
he stinketh.

Yet Jesus calls him from the tomb,
either not able to smell
the stench of death
or just as likely he doesn't care,
and Lazarus, wrapped in burial clothes,
comes stumbling back into the light of life.

There's theological significance

to Jesus not caring that Lazarus *stinketh*
—making the Lynard Skynard lyric, all the better:
Ooo that smell...can't you smell that smell
...the smell of death surrounds you...

But Lazarus's resurrection

causes quite an uproar.

What tensions there were,
have now escalated between
Jesus and Temple and Roman authorities.

With Passover so close,

Jesus knows Pilate surely will not let
a ragtag group of Galileans
start an upheaval.

Yet Christ has his face set toward Jerusalem

and even though he stops walking about openly
he will not stop
what is soon to be set in motion.

Lazarus and his sisters,
Mary and Martha are good friends of Jesus.
This family is different
than other families to Jesus.

For the Son of Man
who had no place to lay his head,
this house and this family
were a home away from home.

Who are my mother and brothers,
those who do the will of my Father
—is what he tells people.

When Jesus saw Mary weeping
for her dead brother,
Jesus was deeply moved.
They love each other in a way
that is noteworthy at least for John's story.

Maybe Jesus was equally Messiah
and man with these friends.⁴
Maybe Jesus couldn't wait to relax a little
while he is with them
before he continues on.

Perhaps knowing that Jesus need to relax
or as a celebration for a new lease on Lazarus's life,
these dear friends have a dinner for Jesus.

I hope they had a feast.

I hope they told stories on each other
laughing about of how Peter
had tripped over a rock
and spilled all the pita bread in the dirt.

I hope they poured each other
a generous glass of red wine
and talked about how beautiful the sunset was.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, http://day1.org/1760-the_prophet_mary

I hope that they teased Jesus
about always having to give the blessing
before the meal.

And when the house quiets down
and conversation gives way
to full stomachs and reclining friends,
we see Mary slip away.

Because of Luke's stories
of Mary and her sister Martha,
we aren't surprised by this.

Martha must be the oldest:
looking after everyone,
making sure their water glass is full,
always playing the good hostess,
she is busy while Mary,
(you guessed it) disappears.

While scents and smells
of dinner and wine linger together,
Mary comes back.

Suddenly it isn't *just* a dinner party among friends.

Mary has brought something in a jar.

Martha knows what it is, so does Lazarus.

They shoot each other a sideways glance
wondering what she will do.

Mary sitting at Jesus's feet,
(and not for the first time,)
breaks the jar
to anoint Jesus's feet.

The house is filled with the fragrance
a mix of ginger and mint;
the heavy scent of Mary's perfume.

John is the only gospel
to name Mary as the woman
who anoints Jesus.

The other gospels tell the story,
with variations here and there,
but what they say about this woman
is significant.
Jesus, in the other stories, claims,
that what she has done
is to be **remembered**;
that what she does
is to be praised and honored
whenever this story is told.

We like to talk about
the expensive perfume,
and guess at what that might mean.
We like to bad-mouth Judas,
because we already know his heart
wasn't in the right place.
He likes to see the speck in his sister's eye
and not the log in his own.

But what about this woman;
what about Mary,
who does something so meaningful
that even all these years later
Jesus says to tell this story
remembering her?

It is true, John doesn't include
that part in his story.
But I won't let that stop us
from remembering her today.

Mary believed in Jesus
in a way that Jesus's closest disciples didn't.
She **was** paying more attention,
she **was** willing to be vulnerable
—open to the scrutiny of all them
(her gift seen as wasteful)
—she offers in expressive generosity

her perfume to anoint the Lord for his burial.

Here she is anointing and consecrating—
those were the jobs for God's prophets.

Prophets were known for doing strange things.⁵

Ezekiel had to lay
on his left side for 390 days
and 40 days on his right.

Jeremiah broke pottery as a protest.

*We just had the Catawba Valley pottery festival,
can you imagine?*

Isaiah walked around naked and barefoot
as an oracle against the nations.

Prophets did strange things.

So when Mary does a strange thing,
and anoints Jesus with a costly gift,
and wipes his feet with her hair...

Jesus says to everyone, *Let her be.*

Let her proclaim her message—

she's preparing me for my death.

I won't always be here with you.

How that statement must have lingered in the air.

Mary believed something about the Lord
that everyone else around him
wasn't prepared to profess out loud.

The disciples desert him
and Peter denies him.

Mary knew he was headed to Jerusalem
and she knew what that meant for him.
She knew what she had to do.

Years ago, in an interview on Dateline,
Matthew Knowles told Katie Couric

⁵ *ibid* and the thoughts following

what it was like to leave a successful career
to manage his daughters musical career.
Couric said to him,
"You know, you're an African-American male.
African-American men
often have more difficulty
making it in the world,
but you did.
You were earning a six-figure salary.
You were very successful.

Yet one day, you walked into your boss's office
and said, 'I am going to leave my position.
I am going to manage
the singing careers of my daughters.'
They must have thought
you had lost your mind.
Was that difficult to do?" [she asked]

This is what Knowles said,
"Yes, it was difficult.
But you see, I believe in these ladies."⁶
Of course his daughter, Beyoncé Knowles
is one of the most successful
female musicians today.
A love that deeply believes.
Surely the people around Matthew Knowles
thought he was a fool.
But sometimes we are called to do
foolish and strange things.

I'm not sure that I've done much
that will be remembered
for the next 2000 years.
It is more true than false
that most of us
will never claim that kind of notoriety.

⁶ The Rev. Dr. Blair Monie, A Lingering Fragrance, http://day1.org/7125-a_lingering_fragrance

But here's the thing.
That perfume, the smell of it
hung in the air in the house.

It woke everyone up and made them all aware
of the reality of what was going to happen.

It drowned out the smell of death
that only days before
had filled the house of Martha, Mary and Lazarus.

I bet Mary could still smell
the scent of the perfumed oil in her hair
on Good Friday.
And I bet she could smell the oil
on Easter Sunday.

A few days later, after this episode,
Mary's act of anointing Jesus's feet
gets reinterpreted as Jesus
washes his disciples' feet.
He tells them, if I don't wash your feet,
you can't have any part of my glory.
And my glory will be in death.
But it will also be in life.

Mary's perfume,
her extravagance and generosity
are just a whiff—
of the extravagance and generosity of God.
Her anointing is a bold statement of faith:
of a deep believing in the way
of the Lord of death and life.

That scent has now faded
into the smell
of fragile, thin Bible pages
cracked open to tell the story of what was.

So while we may not get a mention
in the annals of time,
we are invited to take part
in the story of what is.

What Mary started,
we can continue.
We can pay attention
to the what the Lord says and does.

We can be those who believe in someone
and something that is true enough
to do strange things,
to attest to our deep believing out loud.

Mary's perfumed proclamation
demands that we stop and account for it.

This smelly story,
is not just mean to be read,
but experienced and lived.
We are reminded, by her example,
that to have share in the Lord
is to accept his glory—
his death and burial.
But also his rising and life.