

## ***“What’s That Smell?”***

*2 Corinthians 2:14-17 • Numbers 28:1-8*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • October 9, 2016

This morning we are continuing our series on the five senses. So far we have talked about hearing and seeing and tasting. Today we want to turn our attention to the sense of smell. Until very recently, scientists thought that humans could distinguish about 10,000 different smells. But just this year researchers at Rockefeller University in New York used different mixtures of odor molecules to test people’s sense of smell and they discovered that humans can actually detect around a trillion different scents.

The way this works is that way up in your nasal cavity, up above your nose, there is a patch of olfactory cells that detect odors that you breathe in. Those cells activate certain nerves that transmit the information to your brain. Humans have about five or six million of those odor-detecting cells, which seems like a lot until you realize that dogs have about 220 million of these cells.

Last week we talked about the sense of taste but actually, most of our sense of taste is from our sense of smell. Your taste buds on your tongue can only distinguish four qualities: sour, sweet, bitter, and salty. The rest of what we think of as taste is actually smell. That’s why when you have a stuffy nose you can’t taste your food.

One of the amazing things about smells is their ability to affect our emotions. Particular smells can trigger memories of people and places. We identify those scents with the way we felt in the past and they bring back those memories. For example, the smell of Dove soap reminds me of taking a bath at my grandmother’s house as a child. In addition to being tied to particular memories, certain scents have an ability to tap into broader emotions. That’s why people use things like essential oils. Of course not all scents are good. Some things just stink. There’s a reason that air fresheners and scented candles are a 2 billion dollar industry in the US alone. We want to get rid of the bad smells and replace them with

good smells. Most of us prefer the smell of vanilla or flowers to the smell of dirty diapers.

Well it’s this idea of good and bad smells that we are looking at in today’s Scripture readings. But it’s not so much our own sense of smell that we’re interested in, but God’s and other people’s. Let’s begin with God. In several places in the Bible, God is described as having the sense of smell. Now we know that God doesn’t have a sense of smell in the same way you and I do. He’s not limited to the few million olfactory nerves that we have. You could say it’s a metaphor but I think it’s more than a metaphor. We are created in the image of God and smell is an important part of us. And Jesus, who is fully God, is also fully human and that includes the sense of smell.

In the Old Testament God commands certain sacrifices to be made. These are referred to as burnt offerings because the priest would burn a portion of them on the altar. The rest of the sacrifice was to feed the priests because they weren’t allowed to own any land. Over and over again, as we heard in our reading from Numbers 28, God calls these burnt offerings a “pleasing aroma.” I’ve burnt food before and I wouldn’t call it a pleasing aroma. But God calls the burnt sacrifices, whether they are animals or grain, a pleasing aroma. Here’s the thing. It’s not really the smell of burnt food that God finds pleasing. The pleasing aroma to God is the heart of the person that sacrifices joyfully out of a love for God. When you joyfully sacrifice your time or your money for God, that’s a pleasing aroma to Him.

The aroma God finds most pleasing is the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross. In 2 Corinthians 2, the Apostle Paul talks about the “aroma of Christ.” He’s talking about the aroma of Christ’s sacrifice and the salvation that it provides for us. But I want you to notice something in this passage. Verse 15 says, “For *we* are the aroma of Christ to God.” This goes to the very heart of the Gospel. When we put

our faith in Christ, that pleasing aroma is credited to us. When God the Father sees you he “smells” Jesus.

To help us understand this idea, Paul uses the image of a Roman triumphal procession. This was a familiar picture to people in the Roman Empire. Whenever the army would return home from war a victory parade was organized. The commanding general would parade through Rome and all the people would celebrate. In these parades there were two groups of people who would march with the general. One group was made up of the victorious Roman soldiers marching with their commander. The other group was comprised of the defeated, conquered soldiers who were taken prisoner. The first group would be rewarded. The second group would be executed.

Because these triumphal processions were considered religious events, people were appointed to burn incense as part of the parade. As you can imagine, the smell of that incense evoked very different emotions for the two groups of soldiers. For one group, it was the smell of victory but for the other it was the smell of death. Paul uses that image to point us to Christ. He says, “For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved *and* among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.

I think there are some very important lessons here for us today. First of all, the only way we can determine what our “aroma” will be is to be “in Christ.” You are either the aroma of Christ or you are not. One of the primary ways you will know how you “smell” to God is by

your willingness to sacrifice to Him. Second, we can’t control how other people react. Paul is pretty clear here that if you are following Jesus some people will be offended. In John 15 Jesus said, “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” That doesn’t mean that every time you offend someone it’s God working through you. You and I are still sinners and are perfectly capable of offending people and Jesus for that matter. But just know that even if you’ve done nothing wrong people may be offended by your faith.

The reason is in verse 14: “thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.” God’s plan to spread the knowledge of Christ is to use you and me. But this is not just head knowledge. It’s heart knowledge. As verse 17 says, “we are not peddlers of God’s word but people of sincerity, commissioned by God.” This is why the idea of smell is so important. When you smell chocolate chip cookies baking you may be able to identify the smell. But the smell brings back memories and feelings. It’s the same way with your relationship with Christ. When people are around you they may learn “facts” about Jesus. But it’s even more important that they experience the presence of Jesus. God wants to use you to influence the people in your life and He is able to do that through your joyful faith and sacrificial love that makes you the pleasing aroma of Christ.

*Amen.*