

## *Holy Fragrance*

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It was one of the dog day Sundays of August when I caught the unexpected fragrance of Easter. On Easter the sweet, heavy fragrance of lilies fills most sanctuaries. What I breathed was not a heavy odor, but palpable nonetheless. The occasion was a service in ordinary time in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania.

The preacher<sup>1</sup> dealt with Romans 8:28, and two acceptable ways of translating this famous verse. The more common wording is often given a triumphal emphasis. “All things work together for good for those who love God.” This can be backed up by success stories, stories permeated by the American ‘can-do’ spirit. The second reading of the same verse allows for a reference to God’s involvement in negative, off the wall happenings. It reads, “In all things, God works for good for those who love him.” Both translations, the minister affirmed, are possible and both point to our destiny – “to be conformed to the image of God’s son.” Furthermore, both translations rest firmly on the resurrection.

For the man who received a promotion, the woman who safely delivered a child, the teenager who ‘aced’ the exam, all things turned out well. It was easy to grasp in those situations that all things work for good and to be thankful. But then again, there is another kind of outcome—the man who was ‘downsized’; the woman battling breast cancer; the teenager who wrecked the family car. The pastor affirmed a resurrection possibility that God was there as well—not to give good fortune, but to shape us in Christ-like ways. Either way, the God we know in Christ is dealing with all the things that affect us. I listened and breathed in the slight ‘fragrance’ of life.

On that August Sunday we sang “O Day of Radiant Gladness” to an old German tune. We heard an Exodus passage telling of release of slaves from bondage plus a reading from Psalm 139—“Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?”, a rhetorical question. It’s to be answered forcefully—“Nowhere!” The service included a jazz ensemble. I didn’t know the tune, and could only catch a phrase of meaning. But I caught the beat, and felt the rhythmic phrase to leave our care with God. God will act.

The prayers that followed the sermon kept the mood that God is God and Christ is Lord and all manner of things will be well. The prayers were for the sick of the congregation, the hurting peoples and nations of earth, families affected by poor economic returns, mission ventures of the church—the full round of pastoral concerns. But, again, the ambient truth was that Christ was already

Lord in today's world. The theme was not that Christ would become Lord only if we worked hard or if things took a lucky turn.

The service ended with a benediction that gave us assurance no matter what. "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think..." I left braced by the fragrance of Easter even though there were no lilies and the fragrance was more subtle.

What was in the air of my spirit were the words of Paul:

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us, spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. 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. (II Cor. 2:14-16)

A few years ago an article in *Newsweek* brought to light the death of Taliban men who were locked in metal storage containers and left to suffocate. The article left us to sort out if American troops were complicit or elsewhere deployed. Those who opened the containers described the horrible stench as bodies spilled out. This is the odor that arises from war or pollution or from some discovered corruption in government or business. Then there is this other odor associated with a different kind of death. It is called 'a fragrance from life to life' and is an outcome of the triumph of Christ. We Christians wear it more subtly than Americans wear Polo aftershave lotion or Chanel No. 5. It's a holy fragrance.

Preachers exude it by the content of their sermons, especially by what one homiletician called 'the grammar' of our sermons.<sup>2</sup> It was Morris Niedenthal who noted that there is a sermon structure that follows the form: If-Then. If you follow some duty or moral obligation, some step-by-step formula, then the thing you desire will follow. The heaviness of an obligation is placed on the congregation's shoulders. It is a moralistic sermon. On the other hand, a Gospel sermon follows a different form: Because – Therefore. Because Christ suffered, died, rose again, therefore—we have peace with God; we are justified; we have hope; we never labor in vain; and so forth. The letters of Paul are in Gospel form where Paul first affirms what God has done in Christ before he goes on to lay out moral directives. The heaviness is placed on the shoulders of Christ. In the triumph of Christ a different atmosphere of moral possibility and hope arises.

There is something real and yet gentle about a fragrance. To dab a spot behind your ear or on your cheek is not the same as spilling perfume down your front. Too many high-powered success stories don't usually highlight the resurrection even when told by buoyant Christians. Too many 'infallible proof' ar-

guments for the empty tomb don't really give God an assist in the art of triumphant living. The holy fragrance escapes more subtly—in language, in choice of illustration, in the playful use of language, in the confident attitude of a liturgist who is bolstered by Gospel facts and mostly by the attitudes of those whose lives hit a rough patch and yet who survive.

Somewhere, Craddock tells of preparing in advance for the funeral service of a colleague who was terminally ill. The colleague had time and health left to talk about the inevitable service that would be—the hymns, the scriptures, the special music. “Let’s not talk about all this now,” Craddock lamented. “Yes, yes—now is as good a time as any,” the friend assured him. So, plans were firmed up, and in time came death and the funeral service. What caught the preacher’s eye was the entrance of the colleague’s wife. When she appeared to take her place with the family, she was wearing a red hat. No further words were needed to say that there also drifted in the aroma of holy fragrance.

The sermon on that August day didn’t end with a convincing illustration or a poem but with an unembellished reading of Peterson’s translation of Romans 8: 28 ff:

God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored. We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him. After God made that decision of what his children should be like, he followed it up by calling people by name. After he called them by name, he set them on a solid basis with himself. And then, after getting them established, he stayed with them to the end, gloriously completing what he had begun.

So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose?

### Notes

1. References throughout are to a service at First Presbyterian Church in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania, where the Rev. Bill Carter preached and Rev. Barbara Muntzel was liturgist.

2. Morris Niedenthal, “The Irony and Grammar of the Gospel” in Steimle, Niedenthal, and Rice, *Preaching the Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 141-150.