

Trinity Church Wall Street 11:15am Holy Eucharist – Trinity Sunday
The Rev. Michael A. Bird Transcript

“The Extravagant Fragrance of Love”

When we read of Mary pouring out a fragrance on Jesus’ feet so expensive and precious it cost her a year’s wages, we might consider how it filled the house with not only the potent scent of Himalayan flowers, but also “the smell of love”. Her “incredible, extravagant gesture” prefigures Jesus’ own ultimate act of abundant love, offers Trinity’s vicar, the Rev. Michael Bird.

As we head towards Holy Week, he invites us to “reflect on the smell that we give off as we encounter the poor, the lost, the broken, the desolate and the sad.” Does it smell like love? The readings are Isaiah 43: 16-21, Psalm 126, Philippians 3: 4b-14, and John 12: 1-8.

Sermon Transcript:

In the name of the true and living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I've always been fascinated by our senses. Those five things that many of us have that allow us access into our present reality, but also access into our deeper reality. I think about how hearing these musicians transports me to a place close to the divine that helps me cross a threshold into holy space and time. I think about the sense of touch. How in my previous parish, one beloved parishioner would come up to me and grab me just above the elbow and pet my upper arm whenever she wanted something. Touch was the operative sense for her and I will always equate her with that moment. But for me of all of the senses, the senses most powerful is the sense of smell. For me, the sense of smell can transport me immediately to a particular person or place or time or emotion. In many cases, my sense of smell takes what was the past and brings it right smack in the midst of my present, like there was no distance. I think a lot about the smells of my childhood. As you know I grew up in this city of Philadelphia, but both of my parents are from the city of Pittsburgh. And so each year we would make a pilgrimage to Pittsburgh. Words that have probably never been said before in the history of time. Each summer, as we received the gift of family vacation, we would drive across the state and arrive in Pittsburgh and on very particular days in the midst of a month of encampment in that city, my brother and I would take turns being able to stay with our grandma Bird, my father's mother. Grandma Bird's house was not big. But because she lived alone, felt enormous. It had all of this territory open to us, all of these unexplored nooks and crannies. But for me, in my sense memory, grandma Bird's house had a particular smell. I remember when I was eight or nine.

So truly, I actually remember this when I was eight or nine, probably in the throes of reading countless Encyclopedia Brown novels. And if you know what those are, you understand that I needed to solve mysteries at that age. I entered my grandma Bird's house. It was my turn to spend the night there and I

searched for the source of that particular smell. Room to room, closet to closet, under furniture, over furniture, you name it I looked there. And finally I made my way into my grandmother's bedroom and they're on her dresser, her dressing table with the requisite mirror on it and the little bench in front of it there was this magical round pink box. My nose had brought me there. But inquiring minds need to go the step further. So I opened the box, I looked inside, I was a little confused by it. I picked up what was in there, which was this puffy thing. And in my haste and my excitement, it slipped out of my hands, hit the top of the dressing table and exploded in a sea of powder. I had found my grandma's White Shoulders powder perfume that I think she had been using since it was invented in the 1940's. White Shoulders is still available for your purchase at Duane Reade or Walgreens. Every time I walk past it, I'm right there in my grandma's house. And every time I smell it, I think about the joy that I knew and particularly the abundant love that I experienced in the gift of being able to stay up a little later than I should have. The gift of being able to have root beer floats at anytime of the day or night. The gift of that freedom. But always the gift of the embodied presence of her love. So for me, the sense of smell is everything. Which is why in today's gospel, it's almost too much. Jesus having raised Lazarus from the dead, finds himself back at the home of Martha and Mary and Lazarus for dinner six days before the Passover. Which means we're getting close to Holy Week.

Jesus is invited over for dinner and there's Martha and Mary and Lazarus and Judas and probably a few other people. And in this house which could not have been that large. Suddenly there must have been this overwhelming fragrance. For Mary took Nard, a perfume harvested from flowers that grow in the Himalayas in India and China and Nepal. A fragrance so precious that it was normally reserved for the anointing of the dead, a fragrant so costly that she spent a year's wages in order to have that. And what did she do with it? She took it and she poured it on the feet of Jesus, her friend, the one who raised her brother from the dead, our Savior. She took that perfume and she poured it out upon His feet. And she took her hair and she wiped His feet with her hair. The smell alone must have been absolutely overpowering and unforgettable. The smell of perfume reserved for the anointing of the dead. But also how incredible that particular gesture. Judas didn't like it very much. Judas used this as an opportunity to belittle Mary, belittle the gesture to minimize what was going on here but you and I, who have fully embraced the gift of our salvation in the person of Jesus Christ understand that what Mary was doing in that moment came from a place of the deepest love and recognition and at the same time points us forward to Jesus's outpouring of himself for us in the very next week. Mary in wiping Jesus's feet with Nard and with her hair points to that moment, which we will recall on Maundy Thursday when Jesus our Savior kneels at the feet of his beloved ones. Kneels at the dirty, smelly feet of his disciples and makes himself one with them, offering himself extravagantly and abundantly that they might receive a new understanding of what loving really is and Mary understood that. She prefigured it. She made it real.

In the face of Judas's criticism, Jesus answers that you will have me for a very little time. You will always have the poor with you and I'll unpack that in half a second because I don't want you leaving with a misunderstanding. But the thing that I hope you understand in this moment is that as she is doing this gesture of abundance and Jesus is greeting it with extraordinary generosity understanding what it is that we are meant to understand that Jesus is our God of abundance and not a God of Judas's scarcity. That there are no limits to the abundance of God's love for us or all of creation. We have seen Jesus. We have seen Jesus symbolize, enact, empower, abundance from the very beginning. Wine from water at the wedding at Cana in Galilee. Loaves and fishes that had leftovers when so many had gathered to hear him teach. Nets cast on one side they came up empty, cast on the other side they were just too much to bring in. We have a God of abundance who exemplifies for us what it means to pour oneself out in love. Let me quickly get back to that statement about the poor. Anyone at that time, anyone in that place hearing those words spoken by Jesus, especially having seen his interaction with the poor, his self-

identification with them and their needs and their losses. Anyone with that understanding experience would immediately hear Deuteronomy Chapter 15, Verse 11, poor persons will never disappear from the Earth. That's why I'm giving you this command. You must open your hand generously to your fellow Israelites, to the needy among you, and to the poor who live with you in your land. Jesus in that moment is not saying the poor don't matter, I do. Jesus in that moment is saying, you cannot separate me from the poor. But you have this incarnate me for just a little while longer, you cannot separate me from the poor so when you go outside and you see them be as extravagant with them as I have been and will be with you.

Pour out your love in abundance for them as Mary is pouring out this perfume on my feet and as I will pour water and wash your feet. In this moment and in this time we understand the gift of the extravagance of God's love, the abundance of God's love, and the fact that our love for God cannot be separated from our love for the poor. I am deeply affected by this passage. The great gift for me this week was in the midst of just plain old busyness. I have had the opportunity to stop and meditate and pray and reflect on a God who loves me so much that he would pour himself out for me. And whose love for me is so great that my response might be the pouring out of myself for God and the poor ones in our midst. I think a lot about how that makes me feel. This extravagant love and I wonder how it makes you feel. Clearly, I'm driven by smell. It's probably why there's just too much incense here at Trinity Church right now but for me, it's not quite enough. Here's a thought that I will offer you from Tom Wright, New Testament Professor and Scholar about this particular passage. As we head towards Holy Week, as we embrace the extravagance of Mary and the extravagant love of God for us and all the smells in this story and what they mean to us. I invite us to reflect on the smell that we give off as we encounter the poor and the lost, and the broken, and the desolate, and the sad. I expect it smells a lot like love. A lot like a year's wages and flowers from the Himalayas and a gift of a woman who understood exactly what Jesus was doing for all of us.

Amen.