

PENTECOST 12

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Pastor David P. Nelson

“Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Grace and peace be unto you from God our creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I came into the church on a Wednesday morning during our recent Vacation Bible Study. The place was crazy in a holy and joyful kind of way. I stopped one little boy who looked like he was having a great time and I introduced myself. He was about 5 or 6 and I asked him how he liked VBS and he said it was great. I asked him how he liked it here at Saint Peter and he replied with a deep biblical and theological insight: he said, “your church smells good.” I’m not sure what he was referring to but I loved that he said it. Ya know, our church ought to smell good. The ministry and service that is carried out in the spirit and the name of Jesus is supposed to smell as good as the fragrant offering to God that is Jesus. Paul talks about our call to imitate this fragrant offering of Jesus....he talks later about our ministry in his name having the

aroma of Christ.....in other words, he talks about the church as smelling good. My little friend was quite insightful.

It is interesting to me that Paul would use the language and image of fragrance or aroma for our ministry. Smell is the first sense we have as infants. It is also, of the five senses, the one that has the longest memory. I know that even as my memory of September 11th in NY City has faded some—even as I have lost some clarity about what I saw or heard—I can smell that acrid stench of death just like it was yesterday. Smell is primal for us and enduring. To be honest in both directions: We recognize and remember the sweet smell of bread baking in the oven at home and the O my God smells that contort our faces and repel us.

So Paul talks to the church at Ephesus about what it means to smell good and what it means to smell bad. Let me be real clear at the outset. He is not talking about what we have to do to get saved. He has already declared the amazing grace of God in Christ that has forgiven our sins and given us new life. Paul is now talking about how to live in that grace....what it looks like and tastes like and smells like when God's people are transformed and transforming. He might as well say, the redeemed followers of Jesus are supposed to smell good.

Paul starts off by telling us—those who follow Jesus— that we are supposed to smell like truth. We are to put away falsehood and lying. He reminds us that we belong to one another—we are members of one another. Oh please hear that one. We are not individuals unto ourselves. Our church is not a

federation of individual opinions and preferences and perspectives. We are a community....we belong to one another and we serve a common purpose that is greater than our own individual point of view. What binds us together as a community is not that we see everything the same way or we all like the same hymns or all have the same politics or all have the same opinions about everything that goes on here. And we are not called to merely tolerate one another or even just respect our differences. Paul reminds us we are supposed to belong to one another....be members of one another. We seek to do what builds all of us not just us. We are supposed to smell good together.....not say I smell delightful and Bob stinks.

Let me go further. Paul even makes it clear that we are specifically supposed to deeply consider and understand the effect of our actions and words on the well-being of the community. Our tongues are to be used for the building up of the community. Our actions are to be used to strengthen the bonds of the family of faith. Paul is clear. ...you know what smells bad? Bitterness, anger, wrath, wrangling slander and malice. That list stinketh. Not only that, Paul says when we speak in bitterness, act in anger, gossip and slander and run people down or constantly complain and criticize or speak unkindly of others we GRIEVE the holy spirit of God. It is not ok to do these things. These things and this petty way of acting makes our church smell bad, it diminishes our life together and it grieves God. Pretty clear.

Instead, Paul says the transformed and transforming people of God have about us the aroma of Christ. We smell sweet like grace and forgiveness. He makes it a point to say that church is where people change and reform and renew and go from stinkin to smelling good. He uses the example of a thief who puts down the stealing and labors in the community of Christ to produce

things that are shared with the needy. A beautiful and sweet smelling forgiveness and amendment of life. And this same sweet smell of grace and kindness is offered to the world as a witness to the fragrant offering of Jesus. Where the stench of the world's disregard for human dignity is met by the fragrance of our love for all people and our fundamental commitment to each human life and its well-being. Where the stench of war is met by the aroma of peace. Where the acridness of bigotry and xenophobia is met by the embrace of hospitality and welcome.

Truth is we know as well as that 5 year old at vacation bible school what smells good and what smells awful. Tongues that cut and demean and tear down smell awful. Acts of selfishness and exclusion and anger and distrust stink and they tear down communities. Grace and kindness, a humble and servant spirit, a deep desire to only say and do that which is pleasing in God's sight and builds up the community.....these are the fragrant aromas that imitate Christ and the life he offered to God on behalf of the whole world. Paul invites us today to a church community that smells good. A place and space that smells like joy and grace.

I know we are not perfect, my sisters and brothers.....but I also know we are saved by the precious and sweet smelling offering of God's only Son for our forgiveness. And so, it is not at all too much for us to aspire to smelling good. To do our very best to only say and do what helps this community of faith—in some ways for our upbuilding but even more importantly as a witness to the whole world of God's love. To do our best to serve, to mind our tongues, to dare to put others first, to be open, truly welcoming, and offer hospitality to all we encounter. To admonish one another gently and humbly.....to live generously as if we knew what we shared was from God.

And so, to paraphrase Paul and a 5 year old at VBS.....Jesus has forgiven all of you and loves you.....smell like it.