

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Cross of Glory Evangelical Lutheran Church

How Do You Smell?

2 Corinthians 2:12-3:6

Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me,¹³ I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-bye to them and went on to Macedonia.¹⁴ But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.¹⁵ For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.¹⁶ To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?¹⁷ Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God. **3:1** Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?² You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody.³ You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.⁴ Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God.⁵ Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.⁶ He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant--not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Yesterday, we had a church family outing at the Global Wildlife Center. One of the stories our tour guide told us was about some boys who decided they wanted to see a llama spit. These boys pestered one llama enough to finally get their wish. They got more than they desired. The entire herd of llamas emptied the contents of their stomachs on these poor boys. The guide then said that these boys would never be allowed back into the park. This isn't simply because they were naughty. It is because llamas never forget a person's scent. These boys would be targets of the llamas' wrath for years to come. This story was another reminder of how each person gives off his or her unique scent. Animals are usually better at detecting this than humans are. But we know that it is true. In our second lesson today, the apostle Paul discusses the aroma that comes from God's messengers. This isn't a physiology lesson, however. It is a lesson about speaking God's Word and the privilege of gospel ministry. And so I encourage you think about your own service to the Lord this morning as you look at the interesting question: how do you smell?

Paul was first and foremost a pastor and servant of the Lord. We see his pastoral heart in the first two verses of our reading. He tells of a time when he went to Troas to preach the gospel, but couldn't remain long because he was so anxious to see Titus. Why did he want to see Titus? He had sent Titus earlier with his previous letter to the Christians in Corinth. There were many problems in that congregation and he was anxious to hear the report of how the letter was received and what the Spirit had accomplished among his brothers and sisters in the faith in Corinth. He cared about them deeply. So much so that he left a great ministry opportunity in Troas to seek out Titus. Despite his leaving, however, he was confident that the ministry of the gospel would go on there as it was happening all

over the world. This occasion leads the apostle Paul to open an extended discussion of the nature of gospel ministry.

In the following verse we have a very vivid picture of what gospel ministry is like. Paul writes, *“Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.”* The picture we have here is one of a Roman triumph march. Following a successful campaign, a Roman general would lead a triumphant procession through the streets of the city. He would bring with him all the enemy captives and lead them through Rome while the people cheered. One of the memorable aspects of these triumph marches would have been the smell. The people burned incense along the way to honor the conquering general. For Rome, the smell of this incense was the smell of victory. In this verse, the apostle Paul pictures the ministry of the gospel as a triumphant march. You can imagine Jesus as the conquering general and his gospel ministers coming along with him announcing the good news of his triumph. This march began with Jesus’ disciples as they went out into the world witnessing to his resurrection and it continues to this very day. The apostle Paul writes that along with this march comes the distinct fragrance of victory. It is the fragrance of knowing Christ and having life in his name. It is a fragrance that is spread to the world through the work of those who proclaim the good news of Easter.

This thought leads us to our original question: how do you smell? Are you involved with spreading the sweet aroma of Easter good news to the world or is the aroma you give off one that is offensive to the gospel message? This thought causes us to wince because we realize that there are times when words and actions are not accomplishing gospel ministry. They are doing quite the opposite. When we refuse to speak the Word or, even worse, when we speak words that are incompatible with Christ’s loving message, we give off the foul odor of this sinful world. Instead of drawing people to Christ with the fragrance of the gospel, we drive them away. God forgive us when this happens.

And, thankfully, that is exactly what he does. That is what makes the gospel message so sweet. God’s love and forgiveness extends to you and me. Through faith in Christ, our foul odor of sin is covered over by the sweet smell of Christ’s perfection. This is the message we want to spread to the world. We want them to know the same peace and forgiveness that we know in Christ. The way they can find out is through us. God uses us as his tools to spread the fragrance of Christ to those who know only the stench of sin and death. What a great privilege it is to be a part of this triumphant procession!

If you think about it, however, that smell of the incense burning in the city of Rome was not a sweet smell to everyone. For those defeated enemies who were being led to slavery or death, it was a very bitter smell. The aroma of the gospel of Christ is also perceived differently by different people. Paul writes in verse 16 of our reading: *“To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.”* Gospel ministry sometimes means offending people and not fitting in with this sinful world. The apostle Paul knew this lesson very well. He was hated by many because of his work as a gospel ministry. More than once, people tried to kill him to stop him from proclaiming the good news of the risen Lord. To them, this message was something vile and contemptible.

We run into some of the same difficulties when we do the work of the Lord. I guess you could say that gospel ministry sometimes stinks. It means not fitting in with everyone around you. It means standing up for the truth of God’s Word in the face of opposition. It might mean being ridiculed or insulted. It might mean alienating people you love. You can’t determine how people will react to what you are

saying. All you can do is simply speak God's truth in love. If someone finds that offensive, that is his or her problem. You are still doing the work of the Lord.

But it isn't always going to be that way. There are times, when just the opposite will be true. There are times when the gospel work you are doing will be very sweet to the ones you are ministering to and to yourself. Just think of it—you could be the tool that God uses to bring the peace of forgiveness to a hardened unbeliever. You could be the instrument of God's grace that extends words of comfort or helping hand to someone in need. And there is nothing better than knowing that God has used you in some small way to accomplish his mission of bringing hope to a dying world through the message of Christ.

The response is not the most important thing, however. Our success as ministers of Christ is not dependant on whether or not we bring people to the Lord in great numbers. Our success lies in the our faithfully doing the work the Lord has called us to do. Whenever we do gospel ministry it is a good thing—whether it is received with joy or met with opposition. Notice what the apostle Paul writes in verse 15: *For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.* All gospel ministry is something that smells sweet to God because it is infused with the fragrance of his beloved Son Jesus.

At times, this can be a daunting task—proclaiming the good news and doing the Lord's work. As the apostle Paul writes: "*Who is equal to such a task?*" We realize that if this work were left completely up to sinners like us, God's kingdom would certainly fall into ruin. But we must remember that our competence comes not from ourselves, but from Christ. He is with us every step of the way—motivating us with his message of peace and enabling us to serve in his kingdom. Think of all the extraordinary things he accomplished through the work of his servant—the apostle Paul. His message was spread far and wide by a man who referred to himself as the chief of sinners. The Lord can also accomplish incredible things through you. You might not make the front page of the newspaper or lead the nightly news on television. But when you are involved in any way—small or great—in the ministry of the gospel there are headlines being written in heaven. May God use each of us to spread the sweet fragrance of Christ's love to a dying world. **Amen.**

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