

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, April 7, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

“FILLED WITH THE FRAGRANCE OF NEW LIFE”

John 12:3

It's a bit too early yet, but soon the smell of spring will be all around us. It's that fresh fragrance that floats through the air as the ground thaws. The newly formed buds on the trees give off their special scent. The soil starts to get soft, warmed by the sun. Even the mud gives off a fresh scent. The fragrance of new life will soon be all around us.

The true source of new life is God through Jesus Christ, his Son. Jesus Christ is filling the world with the fragrance of new life.

Today's Scripture from John 12: 1-8 is filled with both the fragrance of life and the fragrance of death. Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany to the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. The family gave a dinner for Jesus, honouring him for restoring Lazarus to the family circle. Martha served, and Lazarus was seated at table with him, a visible symbol of Jesus' life-giving power. Mary took a pound of costly perfume, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. (John 12:3)

Now some people are allergic to the scent of perfume. Some churches have posted a notice which reads, "No Scents is Good Sense." But no one complained about the scent that came from Mary's expensive perfume. And that day in the house in Bethany the fragrance of new life was also in the air. It was in Lazarus whom Jesus had raised from the dead. It was in Jesus himself. Just before performing that mighty act Jesus had declared, "I am the resurrection and the life."

But the fragrance, or perhaps I should say the stench of death, was also in that house. Judas Iscariot asked, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" That sounds very reasonable. But Judas said this, not because he genuinely cared for the poor, but because as treasurer he wanted to steal some for himself. The stench of sin was in the air which inevitably leads to the stench of death. Judas' greed would lead him to betray Jesus unto death. Then overwhelmed with guilt Judas would die by his own hand.

Jesus told Judas to leave Mary alone. Her act was a symbolic anointing of Jesus, in advance of his burial. "You will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me," he said, quoting Deuteronomy. Jesus was saying. "The poor will always be with you. And you should help them whenever you can. But you will not always have me, because I am soon going to die on a cross." So along with the fragrance of life, the fragrance of death hung heavily in the house at Bethany.

The fragrance of death sadly marks this world. Now there is natural death from disease or old age or accident. It comes from the fact that we are mortal. That kind of death itself causes much grief. But this kind of death was not God's intention from the beginning. Death only entered the world after Adam and Eve disobeyed God. That's why Paul writes, "The wages of sin is death." Cain killed Abel in anger, and death has marked the world ever since. Jesus' death was a result of sin, not his own sin of course, for he had none. It was the result of Judas's sin, and the sin of the political and religious leaders who killed Jesus him to protect their status and power. Indeed, Jesus, God in human flesh was rejected and killed by the sin of the world, and we all share in the guilt.

"Thou shalt not murder," God says. But humans have always devised new and cruel ways of killing one another. We have gone from rocks and arrows to crosses and guns and bombs and gas chambers and other bizarre means. The biggest threat one human has over another is to say, "I have power to kill you." The book of Hebrews says that "humans are held in bondage by the fear of death." The stench of death fills the world.

Now it's tricky for a preacher to speak about abortion but let me offer a few thoughts. And these are my own thoughts which you may or may not agree with. First, a personal story. Some years ago, I was an on-call chaplain at the Credit Valley Hospital. One day, a nurse called on behalf of parents. She asked if I would come and bless a baby that had been taken, as she called it. I found out more when I got to the hospital. The baby had been aborted, about 5 months into the pregnancy. Tests showed that the child had a severe heart defect. If he was born at full term he wouldn't survive long and might never leave the hospital. So the parents made the very hard decision to terminate the pregnancy, since they already had two children at home and the burden would be too great. I was led into a small room where the taken baby was on a table lying on a blanket. The parents were too distraught to join me and I never met them. But I spent a few minutes there, blessed the baby and committed him into God's eternal care, before leaving with a rather heavy heart.

Now let me say that I do not judge or condemn the parents for their decision, not at all. Obviously it was very difficult for them, and who knows what any of us might do under those circumstances. After I blessed the baby I prayed for the parents, too, though they weren't in the room. They needed much sympathy and love and grace.

But I will never forget how well developed externally that child was. All the parts were already there, all of them. It was obviously a boy. The head was more pointed than rounded, but this was definitely a human being. I cannot buy the claim that a foetus is just a clump of cells.

No matter where anyone of us stands on abortion, I think we have to be saddened at how it has become so common. There are nearly 100,000 abortions in Canada every year. About 900,000 in the United States. An estimated 40-50 million world-wide. That's a lot of human potential. And less than 8% of those are due to fetal abnormalities, or excessive health risk to the mother, or because of rape and incest. It was hoped that even as abortion was made completely legal it would also become increasingly rare. That has not happened and we wonder what the end result will be.

And I am not hard-line about it, not at all. I think that in some hard cases abortion is morally acceptable as the lesser of two evils. But some people these days are actually applauding and cheering abortion. It is not something to be celebrated. It is something to be accepted with sad and grieving hearts, as sometimes being a regrettable necessity. I think God, the Creator of life must weep tears in heaven over this and indeed all the ways humans abuse, harm and kill one another. It's all an indication of how far we've fallen from God's intention for good and loving human relationships.

Well, I've said enough about that. But in many ways, the fragrance of death, the stench of death fills the world.

But in this world so marked by death there is good news. "The house was filled by the fragrance of the perfume." Jesus Christ is filling the world with the fragrance of new life. Yes, Jesus was soon going to die and be buried. God's Son had to die to overcome the power of sin and death which bound the whole world in fear. He had to die in order to overcome the stench of death. On the Cross Jesus would make atonement for our sins. Then on the third day the Father would raise him from the dead in triumphant victory. God's love would be forever proven stronger than the power of sin and evil and death. The stench of death is overcome by the even greater fragrance of life. And right now the living Lord Jesus Christ is filling the world with the fragrance of new life. By his life, death, burial and resurrection Christ is spreading the aroma of new life everywhere. This aroma is even more pleasant than the fragrance of the perfume which filled the house at Bethany.

Jesus is filling us, his people, with the fragrance of new life, abundant life. Whoever turns to Christ in repentance faith, no matter what the past has held; no matter what they have done; whoever turns to God's Son is forgiven by God, accepted, justified, made right with God. The burden of guilt is lifted. Through our faith in Christ we are given a new quality of life, with the fragrance of eternity about it. We are born again to a living hope.

Furthermore, through us, his people, Jesus is spreading the fragrance of new life. Listen to the words of Paul. "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. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing." (2 Corinthians 2:14,15) Do you know what Paul is saying here? He is saying that we are spreading the fragrance of Christ in the world. Everything we do, as God's people, is all about doing that. The church helps fill the world with the fragrance of new life in Christ. We preach Christ as the source of hope and forgiveness and healing and new life for all. Our outreach programs help spread the fragrance of new life to the poor and others in need. Every gift we make, including our support of shelters for single mothers, helps spread the life and hope of Christ.

Jesus Christ is filling the world with the fragrance of new life. He is doing it in many ways, including through us, his people. We are the aroma of Christ to the world.

One day Jesus Christ is returning and the fragrance of new life will completely fill the world. The kingdoms of this world will become the Kingdoms of our God and of his Christ. Revelation tells us of that glorious day... "when the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them.

They will be his God and he will be their people... He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." Jesus Christ is filling the world with the fragrance of new life. Right now. And in God's own time God's work through his Son will be complete.

Think of it. Without Jesus' victory over the power of death, there would be no real hope, only sadness and despair. But Christ's victory fills us and the world with living hope.

In his excellent book "24 Hours That changed the World" (the 24 hours from the last supper to the crucifixion), Pastor Adam Hamilton writes about a man in his Methodist congregation. After years of trying to have children, the man and his wife finally brought a little girl into the world. Then months later, he was diagnosed with a rare and aggressive form of cancer. The man showed a remarkable faith in the midst of it. He told Pastor Hamilton, "I know God doesn't give his children cancer. This is a part of life. Of course, I am praying to get well. But even more than my own healing, I am praying that somehow, in the midst of my battle with cancer, the glory of God might be revealed in my life." He went on, "I know that Christ has risen; and because he lives, I will live. I am not afraid. I know he has prepared a place for me. And I trust that he will send people to care for my wife and daughter. Like Paul, if I live longer, I will be thankful and hope to be useful to him. But if the disease takes its natural course, I know I will be with him, and I am grateful for that."

Jesus Christ is filling the world with the fragrance of new life, eternal life. This life is for you and for me. So receive this sacrament today with faith. And be filled.