

“What Does This Sermon Smell Like?”

John 12:1-8

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

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Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

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The priest Gregory Boyle will be speaking at a United Ministries lunch here in Greenville later this month. Boyle is, as many of you know, a widely acclaimed figure for all the work he’s done with gang members in Los Angeles during the past 3 decades.

In his first book, *Tattoos on the Heart*, Boyle recalls a parish in which he served as priest in the 1980s. It was a church that decided to open its doors to homeless immigrants during the week. Which meant that every night, homeless and undocumented workers would sleep in the church.

The church’s decision was not without consequences.  
Threatening messages arrived on the answering machine.  
Graffiti appeared with not-so-kind things to say.

But there was another problem as well.  
The SMELL.

On Sundays, Boyle and others in the church would come early and do everything they could to eliminate the odor that the men who slept there left behind.

They’d sprinkle “Love My Carpet” all over and then vacuum like crazy.  
They’d put potpourri in strategic places, used a lot of Air Wick.  
They’d burn incense, do whatever they could to get rid of the odor.

**But the smell persisted...nothing would get rid of it.  
And, church being church--people grumbled.**

Finally, in worship one day, Boyle decided to face the problem head on. During his homily, he asked the congregation a question:

***“What’s the church smell like?”***

Well, people were mortified.  
Eye contact ceased.

Women started searching their purses for who knows what.

***“Come on,” Boyle said, “What’s it smell like?”***

Finally, an old man (who never cared what other people thought), called out, **“Smells like feet!”**

***“Excellent,” Boyle replied.***

***“And WHY does it smell like feet?”***

“Because many homeless men slept here last night,” a woman answered.

“Why do we let that happen?” asked Boyle.

“It’s what we committed to do,” said someone else.

***“And why would we commit to that?”*** asked Boyle.

**“...Because it’s what Jesus would do,”** someone said.

**“Well then,”** Boyle replied, **“what does the church smell like now?”**

“It smells like commitment,” one man called out.

“It smells like roses!” another woman shouted, and everyone in that church laughed and cheered...<sup>1</sup>

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I share that story with you because I’d like you to imagine something.

Imagine that you’re a member of that church.

Imagine the smell, if you can go that far...

What does that church smell like to you?

Is it feet? Is it roses?

I know that’s a strange question to ask at the start of a sermon.

But I’d like you to do this a few more times with me.

In fact, I’d like you to enter a **FEW MORE ROOMS** with me this morning.

If you enter a room and something smells different, it’s going to get your attention...

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, New York: Free Press, 2010.

The next room I'd like you to enter is the room that the Gospel writer John describes in our text for today.

It's the home of Lazarus.

Jesus is there. Mary and Martha are there.

I'm assuming that Judas, maybe other disciples are there.

And you recall what happens in that room, right?

*“Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.”*

Filled with the fragrance of the perfume... what's that smell like to you?

Be careful before you answer that question.

To Judas, it smelled like A BIG WASTE OF MONEY.

Now I know that our text says that Judas was a thief and all that...but never mind his motives, whatever they were. Frankly, Judas has a point. Why not just wash Jesus' feet with water? Why spend a YEAR'S WORTH OF WAGES—that's what 300 denarii was—on one single act of devotion?

What does that room, in Lazarus' home long ago, smell like to you?

I think it's very easy to hear our Gospel text today, and say, oh, of course, Mary did the right thing.

The faithful thing.

The room smells like faithfulness, it smells like love, because Mary anointed Jesus with something expensive and beautiful before his death.

And that's true.

But there's another truth—Mary's act... isn't just a faithful thing.

It's an excessive thing.

Perhaps...an unnecessary thing?

So the THIRD room I'd like you to enter is this room.  
Put yourself here, not today, but on Maundy Thursday just 11 days from now.

And pretend for just a moment that your new pastor has decided we're going to wash each other's feet on Maundy Thursday.

New tradition. It's got biblical precedent, after all—in the very next chapter, John's Gospel says that Jesus washed his disciples' feet on the last night of his life. So imagine that I'm instituting a new practice, we're going to wash one another's feet. But we're not going to do it with water.

We're going to do it with Clive Christian perfume.

Mind you, I know NOTHING about perfumes...but a quick Google search revealed that there is at least one version of Clive Christian perfume that sells for over \$12,000/ounce.

So picture this.

I decide, as your new pastor, to spend \$40,000 from our church's operating budget on a 3.4 ounce bottle of this Clive Christian perfume, and we're going to use that bottle on people's feet on Maundy Thursday.

What do you think would happen?  
I'll tell you what would happen.

The Session would call a meeting and say, "Ben, where in the Book of Order did you get the authority to spend \$40,000 on a bottle of perfume? Do you **really** want to stick around as the pastor here??"

In other words, it would be a RIDICULOUS act.  
A reckless act.  
A wasteful act.

Don't be nervous, I'm not going to institute this tradition on Maundy Thursday. But pretend that it DID happen...what does this room smell like to you?

Does it smell like devotion...or does it smell like an extravagant, unnecessary, EXCESSIVE act?

Play with that word with me...the word excessive.  
Mary's act was extravagant and excessive, and Jesus praised her for it.

Have you ever been around somebody who did something excessive before...something a bit over the top?

It doesn't have to be with MONEY.  
It could be with anything.

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One of the pastors of the church in which I grew up once told me about a Sunday when he was presiding over communion. It was just another communion, something he'd done a hundred times before.

But it happened on this particular Sunday that the person in charge of preparing the elements for communion was a good friend of his, and this friend had a mischievous sense of humor.

After the elements were on the table, my former pastor started to say, "Friends, this is the joyful feast of the people of God,"—and then...  
he smelled something unusual.

So he got to the next line, "People will come from east and from west," he took another breath—and thought to himself yes, that's definitely WINE that I smell.

Now I've served churches that will offer wine during communion, and I've been in churches that don't offer wine during communion. At the church in which I grew up, there was NEVER any wine during communion.

So my former pastor, he catches this smell...and then he catches a glance at his friend who had prepared the elements, and his friend was standing there, biting his lower lip, stifling a grin.

Well, this could be a disaster, right?

All those little cups filled with what's supposed to be grape juice, and now perhaps some of them have wine—my former pastor had images of parents calling

him on Sunday afternoon, upset because their child took a small cup of wine for communion, or even worse, a couple members of the congregation who were recovering alcoholics and couldn't have any wine, but they had innocently taken some during communion...

As my former pastor went into the words of institution, he set all the trays out on the table, and starting SNIFFING—

“This is my body, broken for you...”

No wine there.

“Do this in remembrance of me.”

No wine there.

And then, finally, it dawned on him.

“In the same manner he took the cup,” my pastor said, and he took a whiff over the pitcher that he was about to pour—YES, THAT’S where the wine was!

Not in the cups where it would get to the congregation, but only in the pitcher...

So my former pastor poured the cup almost full,  
and he said, “This is my blood, poured out for you,”  
and looking directly at his friend, he CHUGGED the cup!

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Years later, that’s a good story.

I wonder, though...at the time that it happened—I wonder if it felt just a little...EXCESSIVE.

Surely, the elder who engaged in such an act did not reveal his actions to the Session...I mean, how would you respond if you were an elder on the Session and you found out one of your communion preparers had done such a thing?

Excessive...how are you with excessive?

Presbyterians are not known as an excessive people, an “over the top” kind of people.

We are “decent and in order” people.

For example, our Book of Order states the following about what happens and appears in a PC(USA) sanctuary:

“We offer creative gifts in worship...including music, art...banners, vestments...furnishings, and architecture. When such gifts only call attention to themselves, they are idolatrous; when, in their simplicity of form and function, they give glory to God, they are appropriate for worship.” (W-1.0204)

In other words—NO EXCESS.

How are you with excess?

I’m not that big on excess.

I don’t like to go to extremes...purple church here, right?

We’ve got some on this side, some on that side...we’re not going to be all the way on ONE SIDE or the OTHER SIDE.

I love serving a church like that.

I tend to argue against excess, but there’s one person who gives me pause.

Do you know who it is?

It’s Jesus.

Jesus was criticized for throughout his ministry...for going too far.

For exceeding the limits of acceptable behavior.

He ate with tax collectors and sinners.

He healed people on the sabbath.

He told stories in which Samaritans were the heroes and parties were thrown for the prodigal.

It bothered people in Jesus’ day.

Just like some of the things he said, they still bother us today.

For example, do you remember the time that he told his disciples, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

Surely, he didn't mean it like THAT, right?  
 Surely, that was an exaggeration, just a little HOLY EXCESS, right?

Or how about the time that Jesus said, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

See, I liked it better when Jesus just said, "Follow me."  
 What's all this business about "...carry the cross and follow me..."???  
 Don't you think this is going too far, Jesus?

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In Rodney Stark's book, *The Rise of Christianity*, there is a description of "how Christians in ancient Turkey would react when their town was struck by plague. The rich, the well-to-do, and particularly the doctors would gather up family and possessions and leave town. They would flee to the hills, to fresher and less polluted air, or to friends or family in towns some distance away. But the Christians, often among the poorest, and many of them slaves, would say and nurse people, *including those who were neither Christians, nor their own family members, nor in any other way obviously related to them.*

Sometimes such people got well again...  
 Sometimes Christians would themselves catch the disease and die from it.

But the point was made, graphically and unmistakably: this was a different way to be human. Nobody had ever thought of living like that before."<sup>2</sup>

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Friends, in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, God has poured out God's very self. And it was costly for God to do it...and it was beautiful for God to do it...and it was EXCESSIVE...

Ah, maybe it's as simple as this.  
 Have you ever been next to someone with strong perfume before?

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<sup>2</sup> This summary and quote is taken from N.T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*, New York: HarperCollins, 2010. It is a summary of a description in Rodney Stark's book, *The Rise of Christianity*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Have you ever sat next to that person, and then you got in your car, and the smell was still on you...like it was stuck to you, almost? And you had to have your clothes washed, or dry cleaned, because it was the only way to get rid of the smell?

What if this text isn't about perfume?  
What if it's about the love and grace of God?

God has poured out God's grace in such a way, that grace just FILLS the room.

It's EVERYWHERE.

And you can't escape it.  
You leave this sanctuary, start driving home, that grace still there.

You get home, you hop in the shower, get out of the shower...it's still there.

You try wearing different clothes, but you can't get it to go away. God's grace is just clinging to you...it's in the air you breathe, it's in the food you eat, it's in the mirror when you look back at yourself every day.

You cannot escape it and you cannot run from it and it's just on you like a smell that will not go away...except it's the grace of God we're talking about here.

It's not bad. It's beautiful.

And it's stuck to you.  
Permanently and forever stuck to you.

And because it's stuck to you, people are going to notice it.

In the ways that you talk,  
in the ways you give your money,  
in the ways that you forgive,  
in the ways that you behave toward the stranger and foreigner,  
in the ways that you provide a voice for the voiceless...

People will notice that grace...and then, because their path crossed your path, that grace is going to be a part of their lives too...it will CLING to them too!

**I'd like you to enter the last room right now.  
It's that room in your heart  
where you know you would not be who you are today  
without the grace that clings to you.**

I'd like you to enter that room in your heart right now.

And then when you come out, when our service of worship is over and you leave that room, I want you to spread that grace.

With everyone you come in contact with, every hour of every day, spread the grace of God in such an extravagant, reckless, excessive way that others will look at your life and say, "Wow...I never thought of living that way before."

Do you think you and I can do that?  
Or is that going too far with this text?

(Amen.)