



Date: July 12, 2015

Title: Pictures of God, Part 2: God Smells

Description: Our sense of smell has much to teach us about God's character and how God relates to us.

Scripture: Psalm 45: 6-8; 2 Corinthians 2:14-16 , Rev 5: 6-10

This all started with me during Jody's sermon last month. "Close your eyes and picture God," she instructed. Then she asked, "was your image male or female?" Uh-oh. I hadn't gone there at all. I had pictured this. (show image) It's a nose. I was embarrassed for myself; that is too weird to mention to anyone. Until I realized how much God is associated with smell.

Scripture

God is immortal, omnipotent (all-powerful), and omniscient (all-knowing). Have you ever thought of God as all-smelling? Forty times in the Old Testament we read of God smelling the sacrifices of the people. At the end of the story of Noah's ark, it's when God *smells* the scent of sacrifices made by Noah that God promises never again to destroy the earth. One of the big differences between our true God and false gods is that those gods don't smell. (Psalm 115) "Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. ⁵They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. ⁶They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell."

In our world, we have learned to be visual people who overwhelmingly value sight and, to a lesser extent, hearing. The Bible knows the power of smell. So do we, when we stop and think about it. I have walked into the kitchen after a stressful day of work and felt my whole body relax when I smell Debbie's pot roast on the stove. In the other direction, I have felt a cold shiver when I emerge from the hospital elevator to the aroma of sanitizer and disinfectant.

Smell is the sense most directly connected to the emotions. We can gaze at something and have no response to it, and have spent hours in front of the TV or computer doing just that. We can have music in the background and have no idea what's playing. But when we smell something, we respond.

Sometimes aromas can stir up strong emotions. Attend a class reunion and walk through the halls of your old school. The chem lab, the gym, the cafeteria—inhalé the distinctive aroma of each of these places and suddenly you are transported back in time. (We won't mention exactly how many years.)

Sometimes emotions remind us of something, and then almost *become* the something itself. My grandfather smoked a pipe. People don't smoke pipes any more, which, insofar as health matters, is a good thing. The other day I was stopped at a traffic light and the driver of the car next to me was smoking a pipe. Suddenly my grandfather was sitting in the car with me. Through the other car's closed window and my car's closed window, the slightest aroma of that pipe wafted my grandfather into my presence. I'm not saying I had a vision or a Walking Dead encounter, but it was more powerful than merely a brief memory. I breathed deeply. "Hello Granddaddy," I whispered. "We only have a moment before the light changes so I need to tell you quickly: I have all my life wanted to be like you. I think I may have in some ways. I hope you think so too." And then he was gone, because the aroma was gone. All the photo albums, all the stories shared with my brothers, nothing would bring him back as powerfully as the slightest whiff of pipe tobacco.

Mothers have learned this. It started several years ago when a mother in Minnesota invented a soft shirt that could be worn like a blanket. The mom would wear the shirt next to her skin for a few hours before heading off to work or out for dinner and the baby, now wrapped in her scent, would be less frantic when she stepped out the door. Mothers whose children have left for college report going into their old bedrooms, closing the door, and inhaling the smell as a way of feeling close to their absent kids.

When those of you who were part of this church in the beginning tell about worshiping in the movie theater, you don't mention the flap, flap sound of seats when we stood, or the rustling of floor-to-ceiling curtains when the AC came on. You speak of the smell of popcorn invading our closing hymn as the staff began to prepare for the matinees.

In scripture, God is closely identified with smell. Which may mean that God is closely connected with us. You can't smell things from a distance. What does the moon smell like? Anybody ever go out at night and smell the moon? You have to be close to something in order to smell it. To describe God as one who smells us is to say something about God.

Smells are hard to describe; they have to be experienced. How do you describe the smell of an orange? "Well, it's like the smell of a tangerine, but not exactly." Try this on the drive home: in a single sentence, convey to someone what standing outside a Krispy Kreme smells like when they turn the "hot" light on. As they say, "You had to be there!" Smells are hard to describe, but powerful to experience. What does that association of God with the sense of smell say about God?

According to scripture, God smells us. 2 Corinthians: "You are *the aroma of Christ to God* among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing." Paul could have told the Corinthians, "You are the *light* of Christ among those who are

being saved..." or "Your voices are the *sound* of Christ..." But smell is the image Paul uses, because smell is so powerful, it evokes emotions, *it connotes nearness*.

The strongest effects of smell occur during absence. The baby longing for his mother, the mother pining for the children who have left her empty nest, a grandfather who passed away some fifty years ago—they reconnect through smell. Smell brings us close to one another when we feel absence.

How do you put this to use?

When you need to feel close to God, you try to pray but can't think of words to say. Stop searching for words. Remember that Revelation, the final book of the Bible, tells us that the "prayers of the saints" are incense carried in golden bowls. The priests' sacrifices on the altar of the Jerusalem Temple were a "pleasing aroma to God." So when you want to pray and don't know how, light a scented candle and be still. Let the aroma of the candle carry your heart's prayer to God. That isn't "new Age" that's a Bible thing.

Do that regularly, until the burning candle itself wafts God's presence to you. To heighten your experience of God, learn to associate God with a smell. I just realized this week as I was preparing this sermon that I already do that without being aware of it. Last Sunday when I served communion, I became aware of the smell of Holy Communion. The grape juice, of course, cloying sweet, but almost irresistible to children; and the aroma of bread: the moment Andy tears the loaf, if I am standing next to him I begin to salivate. But most of all during communion, it's the smell of you. I won't name names—A's perfume, B's leather jacket in the winter, the lotion one of you uses that is the lotion my mother used to wear on her hands when I was a child. These smells, so connected now with the holy sacrament, draw me into God's presence. And I realized that for me, the smell of God is closely connected with the smell of you. "You are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved..."

Amen.

The hard part of preaching is not deciding what to say, but choosing what not to say, what to leave out. These sermons about little used images of God are especially hard.

This morning, for example, I didn't talk about the dark side of smell. In Isaiah, God is furious with Israel. God's people, who are very religious, are ignoring the poor and the friendless, and Isaiah says that the smell of their worship is a stench to God. The people presume that because they attend worship and put money in the offering and have the prayers and creed memorized, that all these things have them and God just like that (very close.) But they take care of themselves while ignoring the needs of those around them; and God has Isaiah tell them they are "a stench in my nostrils, an acrid smell that never goes away."

It's in there, in the Bible; you figure out how to preach that.

It seems to say that good people smell good; bad people smell bad. It's so dangerous to assume that we know which is which. So the church has an ancient tradition that the saints have a holy aroma. Even their corpses smelled like flowers.

I'm good with that, because I at least start the day smelling like Irish Spring and a freshly ironed shirt. What does that say about people whose bodies smell like dirt and urine and sweat. Without words, I've been taught that people who haven't showered for days because they sleep in their car and have no air conditioning to keep them dry and fresh—they smell bad, therefore they must somehow *be* bad.

According to Isaiah—and many other parts of scripture—God may feel the reverse: the woman working two jobs to feed her kids, who reeks of grease after her night shift at MacDonalds may be a lovely fragrance to God, while the one who emanates Aveda Shampoo and massage oils but who spends 24/7 caring about no one but herself makes God go “phew.”

Maybe Isaiah is trying to teach us to unlearn whatever we may have concluded about the relationship of smell to virtue. But you figure out how to preach that; I'm done with this sermon.