

The human sense of smell is an amazing thing. This funny looking thin hanging off my face wields a seemingly inordinate amount of influence over my life.

It has tremendous sway over other parts of my body. Up to 80% of what I taste is dictated by what I smell. One minute it can kick my saliva glands into high gear at the smell of fresh bread, and the next it can cause the muscles of my throat and stomach to heave as I gag over a particularly ripe diaper.

But it doesn't just affect me physically, as God designed it, the sense of smell can trigger specific memories and emotions. So, sometimes all it takes is a certain smell to transport my brain to another time and place and bring with it a flood of memories and emotions tied to those places.

For instance, two weeks ago I walked into this church and smelled lilies. For me, just that smell put pep in my step and a smile on my face because that smell is indelibly tied to Easter and all the amazing celebrations of Easter from my past.

The human sense of smell is an amazing thing.

Today Paul (the author of our reading from 2 Corinthians) tells us put the amazingly powerful human sense of smell to work for our risen Lord. Today Paul tells us to be stinky Christians sharing a smelly message (and no, he isn't just talking about the days when we might have a little coffee on our breath). In that 2 Corinthians reading that Pastor read just a bit ago Paul uses a metaphor to explain a major part of what it means to be a Christian. Paul says that we are the fragrance of God. We are the aroma of Christ to this world.

Well, what does that mean?

Like it or not, you are an ambassador for Christ. The people who see you drive into this parking lot on a Sunday morning associate you with this church. Like it or not, the people who know that you regularly attend St. Paul's Lutheran Church or send your kids to St. Paul's Lutheran School are going to associate you with Christianity and Jesus.

And this is how Jesus intended it to be. Jesus doesn't walk around eating Filet-o-fish sandwiches to prove he is real. Post-Ascension, Jesus trended away from personally showing up in people's homes and churches, but before he left he made very clear that his message, **the message of forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations**. Preached by who? Us – Jesus' followers.

Just like the smell of lilies makes me think of all the Easter celebrations of my past or the smell of fresh bread sets my mouth watering, we are to be the aroma of God to this world bringing a very clear image and fragrance of God to all who interact with us.

And being the fragrance of God is an important task. We are the direct representatives of God to this world. When people look at us and our every action they should see Jesus in all of his glory, in all of his perfection... we are to be the aroma of Christ... And it leads me to ask, what smells have you been giving off to this world?...

It is a rancid thing when Christians fail to act like Christians. And we know that.

Most of you probably know people who used to go to church, they used to believe in Jesus, but then they had one or a series of bad experiences – times when Christians treated them in distinctly un-Christ-like ways – and because of that rancid stench they walked away.

We've all heard the stories of outrage and scandal when a Christian Pastor is caught doing very unchristian things.

We've all heard the "Christians are such hypocrites" line – often it's just a worn-out excuse to not come to church – but we all know that it's an excuse based on the constantly repeated scenario of people outside the church looking in and seeing Christians not act like Christians.

It's a rancid thing when Christians fail to act like Christians... We know that... we also prove that, don't we?

Think back, during this last week did you always, in every way, emit the aromatic love of Jesus to the world around you?

Did the people who interacted with you at work, at the grocery store, on the highway, in your home smell nothing but Christ-like odors coming from you? I bet that many of you don't even have to go any further than your interactions with your family this morning to see the stench not of Jesus but of selfishness pouring out of the pores of your body.

Paul says that **"through us [God] spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him,"** but in all my sinfulness I fear I am emitting all the wrong odors. We smell more like a rotting corpse than the risen Christ. I am obliged to wonder with Paul, **"Who is equal to such a task?"**

It's the question of honest humility that recognizes that if God was planning of using me to the perfume of his love to the world, I'm not delivering the goods, and not only when I'm putting out the wrong odors. Sometimes I try and hide my aroma all together... because, let's face it, being the fragrance of God is not always a very rewarding task.

You may have some firsthand experience with that – times when you’ve tried to be the aroma of God and share the love of Jesus with someone (to invite them to church or tell them about what Jesus means to you), only to have things get awkward, be ignored, or have them shove it back your face. It’s not a comfortable thing to put yourself out there, and share your faith only to be rejected.

And just like Jesus wants to use us as his aroma, he also warns us that hand in hand with this fragrance will come rejection. We are the aroma of Christ to this world, but unfortunately God warns us through Paul that we will not smell the same to everyone.

I’ll read verse 15 again, “**For we are the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.**” Our message has this beautiful aroma all unto itself. We get to preach about the love of Jesus which is, without a doubt, the most beautiful and amazing love this world has ever seen, but not everyone sees it that way.

There will always be those out there who want nothing to do with our message, people who want nothing to do with Jesus, and to them we are the smell of death. The message we are to preach is great for those who believe in Jesus but hand in hand with the message of forgiveness through Jesus also comes the message of condemnation apart from him. And let’s face it – it’s not fun smelling like death.

And so what is one natural reaction to this call to smell like death and the awkwardness and rejection that come with it? Well, cover up the smell, right? Stop telling people about Jesus, stop stinking to high heaven and all the rejection goes away.

And I’m betting it won’t take all that long for you to think of those times too – times when tried to hide the fragrance of God completely, times when bowed to the pressure and kept your beliefs to yourself.

So, today Paul tells us to be stinky Christians sharing a smelly message, and first of all, we are horribly inconsistent at it (one moment smelling the way we should, and the next stinking of sin). And on top of that, sometimes we try and hide the smell all-together.

And yet here we are... Whether we always like it or not, whether we do it perfectly or not, we are Christ’s ambassadors. Jesus has chosen to share his aroma through us.

And it brings us back to that question of Paul: **Who is equal to such a task?**

We, by ourselves, are not equal to the task. But we are not by ourselves. There is a confidence and competence that Paul and God would infuse into our ministries today through his Word and Spirit.

Listen to these verses again: “**Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant.**”

When you feel unequal to the task, remember...

... remember that we are part of and swept up in that great Easter Triumphal procession. That’s what Paul is talking about in those first verses. When you feel unequal to the task remember that at the end of the day, we win because Jesus wins. When Jesus wins your stench is covered up. When Jesus wins your failures are atoned for; all of the ways you prove yourself unequal to the task of ministering His New Covenant are washed clean in the blood of the Lamb.

When Jesus wins you win which means even your failures are victories in disguise. All of those times when you preached the Word and it was thrown back in your face, when you smelled like death, all of those failures are victories in disguise just like the stench of death on Good Friday was a victory in disguise. The smell of death that filled the air on Good Friday was replaced with the smell of life on Easter morning.

We are a part of that great Easter procession. Because Jesus wins we will one day enjoy the smells of a heavenly banquet for all eternity. And if you think fresh bread smells good now, just wait...

When you feel unequal to the task, remember...

... remember God has not only made Christ’s victory yours, he has called *you* to preach. It is a God-given fact through Paul: **“We are to God the aroma of Christ.”**

Jesus himself has called you and me and has given us the same task he gave those early disciples. Jesus looks at you, inadequacies and all and says, “I am going to work through you.”

Knowing we are the representatives of God will always be an intimidating and humbling thought, but that’s ok, it’s a good thing to respect our calling and fear our God. We cannot, however, let our inadequacies stop us from preaching. The very fact that God himself *has* called us to do his work can and should give us confidence.

God does not make mistakes. From my perspective, it would be a mistake to use you or me as the representative of perfect love but this is how God has chosen to work. You have been called, and in this God-given calling you are made competent – component because you are ministers of Jesus’ gloriously one-sided New Covenant.

That phrase “New Covenant” is an important one. When Jesus died on the cross he ushered in a new era in the history of this world, an era that is defined by a new covenant – a loving, binding, promise between God and humans. Because of Jesus’ death on the cross we live in a New Covenant era where God loves us not because we do all the right things and put off all the right smells. He loves us because of Jesus. In this New Covenant era we have a God who takes weak things like us and our stuttering and stammering attempts to share Jesus and he makes us strong by forgiving us and giving us a message in his Bible that has a power all by itself.

In Christ’s victory we are made bold, in our calling our competence is backed up by God himself. And this, this confidence, this competence, God would infuse in your life.

So, breathe deep this morning. Can you smell it? The smell of victory has been poured all over us, the fragrance of forgiveness, the aroma of hope and all because of Jesus. Don’t keep this life-giving perfume to yourselves. Be stinky Christians confidently sharing the smelly message of Jesus’s New Covenant. Amen