
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

We Are the Aroma of Christ

A Sermon by

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Scripture: 2 Corinthians 2:12-17

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Some believe that the church in Corinth was Paul the Apostle's 'favorite' church. We all maybe have favorite churches, don't we? Maybe it is this one, Church of the Beatitudes. Maybe it is the church you grew up in, were baptized in, were married in, or where the church welcomed you in for a commitment ceremony. We know through the writings in the New Testament, from the Book of Acts on, that Paul, once a persecutor of followers of Jesus, had his own transformation on the road to Damascus and became a follower of and a teacher about Jesus. Paul took his story on the road, and found places and people, towns and villages that were hungry for Gospel, good news, hope. Paul found Corinth, a multiracial, multicultural city, a crossroads, a seaport, a city of antiquity that once rivaled Athens in wealth. On the acropolis in Corinth stood the magnificent Temple dedicated to the goddess Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty. There was a Jewish synagogue in Corinth, and gods of Rome and Egypt as well.

And in comes Paul with stories of a new way, a man named Jesus, his death and resurrection. God was not about the Law, but about a new way of life and living. Paul stayed with the church in Corinth probably longer than with any other church, and even when he went away, he heard about the community there.

He heard of arguments. He heard that there were conflicts in the church. Imagine that! The people in Corinth would gather for worship, in homes, each bringing food, and some would not share their food. Others showed up drunk! And worst of all, women were speaking in the churches!

Paul would write a letter, from wherever he was then, back to the church in Corinth and say to them, "Friends, remember why we started this church? It was because we had heard about Jesus. We heard about how he welcomed the least and the lost, the outcast and the fringe. We heard that there was a new way to live. There was no longer Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free. We were all one, like a body, and a body can't say to itself, 'Eye, I have no need for you; ear, I have no need for you.' People of Corinth, I want you to think of yourself as a body, the body of Christ."

Paul and time would go on, and again Paul would hear of the church. This time they were arguing about speaking in tongues, and the carpet color choices, and whether they should start a new contemporary service. And Paul writes to them again, "Friends, remember why we started this church? It was because we had heard about Jesus, and he taught us each a new way to live. Love is patient and love is kind. Love is not boastful or rude. Love believes all things, hopes all things..." You have heard those words. Paul was not officiating at a commitment ceremony; he was talking to a church community. Love, agape, self giving love, like the love of Jesus, is our way.

The letters we have now as First and Second Corinthians may be parts and pieces of many letters, written over many years, compiled in some semblance of order and meaning. Today's reading is Paul again writing to his beloved church, telling them that he has been traveling, that he has been looking for his companion and he is going on to Macedonia, Greece, and he has these words for his people:

When I came to Troas to proclaim the good news of Christ, a door was opened for me in the Lord; but my mind could not rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said farewell to them and went on to Macedonia. But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not

peddlers of God's word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence.¹

“We are the aroma of Christ.”

What are some of your favorite aromas? Coffee, bread baking, mown grass, lavender, a baby freshly bathed versus a baby that needs to be bathed?

In Ted's first congregation near Washington, Missouri, there were a lot of hog farms. Now I grew up in the country, but nothing like near a hog farm. One day I said to one of the farmers, “John, how do you stand the smell?” Without missing a beat, he said, “Every morning, I wake up, open the door wide, take a deep breath, and I smell MONEY.”

We are the aroma of Christ. People have aromas. Dr. Yvonne Delk, first African American woman to be ordained in the United Church of Christ once told a story of her visit to Riverside Church in New York City, huge cathedral church, every seat taken. Worship had started. A person from the streets of New York City came and sat down next to her. Dr. Delk could not tell if it was a man or a woman because the person had on so many layers of clothes. The service went on until the pastor said in a booming voice, “Now is the time when we stand up, share a sign of the peace of Christ, Peace be with you.” Dr. Delk looked around, turned to the person next to her and offered a hug. She said, “Within moments I was holding a sobbing person. And I wondered how long it had been since that person had felt the loving touch of another human being.”

We are the aroma of Christ. My father was an electrician, a quiet kind of guy, but always a man who if he knew you needed help, and he could give it, he would slip in quietly, offer his gift of help, and just as quietly leave. I wonder if people did not say, “That Fran Nelson. He was the aroma of Christ, an aroma of life to life, not death to death.”

Churches have aromas also. Some smell like daycare centers, or homeless shelters. Some smell like Taste & See and pie making. Some smell like hamburgers and hot dogs on a hot Fourth of July, and enchiladas or kim-chee or other sauerkraut suppers. Some smell like dust and must and death, and you can often trace a line back to the Church Council meeting that said, “No outside groups will be allowed to use our buildings, lest they get dirty.” No one has used the building. The last ones out should turn off the lights.

We don't seem to have that problem here. Our buildings are a large portion of our mission. Our buildings offer a welcome to groups that might not have any other place to go. We send a message out to the community in all sorts of ways, “We are a church that reaches out and reaches in, welcomes in, all the people.” Just sit in my office some morning and watch. Some days almost a parade of people come to our doors and ask for food, for water, for clothing, for help. “When did we see you hungry, Jesus, or thirsty, or naked?” We are the aroma of Christ, an aroma from life to life, not an aroma from death to death. We cannot help everyone. Generous people who buy food and water and food cards and give to our emergency fund allow us to help many. I can only hope that few people go away from our doors and say, “That church, Church of the Beatitudes, they were a real stinker.”

¹ 2 Cor. 2: 12-17

People have aromas. Churches have aromas. Even the community of faith has an aroma. Don't you smell it too? An aroma of life in this community of faith? Church of the Beatitudes, like all other communities of faith, is constantly changing. People come and go. Babies are born. Children grow up. People commit themselves to one another. Loved ones and friends among us come to the end of their lives. Individuals move into our community and church life. Others leave us, moving away to new places, new experiences, and new opportunities. It is wonderful when we can mark those times of passage, of hello and goodbye. We do not always have the chance to say goodbye. This weekend was going to be one of those times when we were going to say goodbye to Pastor David Weaver, but we have had to settle for less than a full farewell. So, in our own small way, this community of faith can still express our thanks for the love, kindness and support shown during the time of relationship. We can offer forgiveness for mistakes made on all sides. We can release ourselves from the relationship and pray that each our lives unfold in God's everlasting love.

Even as far away as the General Synod meeting in Grand Rapids, Michigan, even as far away as family time in New York state, I could swear that I could smell the aroma of welcome, the aroma of future, the aroma of positive change in front of us. A new initiative into Health and Wellness Ministry with Kathy Garast. A new Interim Director of Pastoral Care and Associate Pastor here, Rev. David Ragan. New partnerships with the Beatitudes Campus. A Young Adult Service Community with outreach into the community. New people coming to us because, why? I suppose because they have heard about Jesus. They heard there was a church that believed there was and is a new way to live, not in fear, not in judgment, not in death and despair, but in life. I had some time to read while away and came across this credo for Progressive Christians: I wonder if, in 21st century language, it might say what Paul was trying to describe to the community of faith in Corinth. I wonder if the words resonate with why you are here and what you have come to know by being here.

I worship and adore God,
Source, essence, and aim of all things,
Spirit that enlivens all beings.
I follow the way of Jesus, who found God in himself
And shared a way for others to find God in themselves.
He was born through love,
He lived for live,
He suffered for love,
He died for love,
But love never dies.
I submit myself to the leadings of the love that is God,
That I may be compassionate to all beings,
That I may live and serve in community with others,
That I may ask for and offer forgiveness,
That I may praise and enjoy God forever. Amen.ⁱ

ⁱJim Burklo Birdlike and Barnless, St. Johann Press, 2008, p. ix.