

I love icebreakers. You know those silly games or activities that help a group of people get to know each other and start to build community? One of my favorite icebreakers is just a random question about something you didn't know you had an opinion on but you probably do, like "What's your favorite kind of sock?" or "What's your preferred type of toothpaste?" or "What's your favorite smell?"

Folks usually chuckle about socks and toothpaste, but smell is an especially good question because often the reason someone has a favorite smell is because of a memory that's tied to it. For me, it's the smell of a campfire because it reminds me of camping with my family, or singing goofy songs at church camp, or just sitting reading a good book with a cup of tea by a fire in the dead of winter. When I smell woodfire smoke, I usually take a deep breath and without even trying, those memories flood my mind and I am instantly transported to that feeling of warmth and peace.

Smell has that kind of power. The power to solidify memories and to bring up feelings of peace, comfort, even joy. Like when you smell good food being cooked or when you catch a whiff of a certain smell and are instantly taken to some faraway memory. It's amazing the effect smells can have on us, for better... Or for worse.

Because smell can also repulse. Like when you forget to wash out that coffee mug from the car, or when you change a particularly dirty diaper, or when the trash hasn't gone out in a while and WOW! That's smelly. Or

maybe the smell isn't bad on its own, but it can still bring up a bad memory. Smell is the sense that I think gets the least attention and yet is so powerful.

Why all this about smell? Well, today's gospel is all about smell. Two smells in particular: perfume and bologna. The first one is obvious. The smell of the perfume that Mary used to anoint Jesus' feet was so strong it filled the whole house. But did you know that at the same time Jesus was smelling the rich aromas of the pure nard, he was also smelling some very strong bologna? That's right. Jesus could smell Judas' bologna from away mile away.

"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" says Judas. If only he had actually *cared* about giving the money to the poor, perhaps this concern might not have been sniffed out for what it was—bologna. But Jesus knows Judas' motives and rebukes him. Jesus also knows that Judas can't understand why Jesus would allow Mary would "waste" so much money because Judas doesn't realize the symbolic nature of what she's actually doing for Jesus.

This perfume is not to cover up a long day's worth of B.O. from walking around Jerusalem or to enhance the "ambiance" of the room. This act is to anoint Jesus' body for burial which will take place just a week later. This is Mary's response to what she must have perceived would be *her* last supper with Jesus. By anointing his feet with a large amount of expensive perfume, Mary is reflecting back the abundant and extravagant love that she had received from Jesus, on this final encounter with her Lord.

Remember, this is the same Mary who, in Luke, sits at Jesus' feet to learn from him. And it's the same Mary whose brother Lazarus Jesus raised from the dead! Mary's response to these incredible gifts was to give her own gift to Jesus. Not to "repay" him (as if she possibly could) but to do something that she knew he required as he approached the ultimate sign of his love for us, Jesus greatest gift that he gave to us—his death on the cross. This is why Mary doesn't think twice about the cost of the perfume. She knows the cost of the gift of new life that Jesus will give to her and to the whole world. What is three hundred denarii in the face of eternal life?

It is for this reason that Paul is able to say to the Philippian church that he can "regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus [his] Lord." In the eyes of his peers, Paul had lost a lot. He was at the top of his field with a promising career ahead of him. But then, he had a life-changing encounter with the Risen Lord and suddenly, everything he thought he knew had suddenly changed. Nothing was more important than knowing Christ—not his career, not his ambition, not even his family lineage, and certainly not something like three hundred denarii. Instead, "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, [he] press[es] on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus"—that is eternal life.

But just what is eternal life? There are many ways to think about eternal life but my go-to is "union with God." This often overlooked theological concept, which is sometimes called theosis, is the belief that when

we are loving God and loving our neighbor, we are in harmony with God's love and God's will and therefore we in union with God's eternal life. While mostly thought of in extreme cases like St. Francis or Mother Theresa, I think there's such this is an "everyday theosis." To me, that feels like when I'm talking to someone about something important in their lives--maybe it's about faith, or maybe it's about their cat that just died, or that they want to stop drinking but don't know what to do. In this encounter, there's a connection and a presence that goes beyond this world and it feels like God is truly present, like the Holy Spirit is alive and moving and filling my whole being with love. I'm not saying that happens all the time but I am saying that when something like that happens in our lives, I believe we can think of that as experiencing eternal life, an "everyday theosis."

An important marker for experiences of eternal life like that is that they are not coerced or manufactured but come as free gifts from God. I have been reminded of this while listening to the Gospel of John at 9:00am in the chapel during Lent. Namely, that eternal life, first and foremost, is a gift. John 3:16 says that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." It's a gift because God loves us and wants us to know God--to have the surpassing value of knowing God in Christ Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.

That is worth much more than three hundred denarii and it is much more powerful than feigned compassion for the poor. And that is the final marker for me about eternal life--it smells good. It's not "fishy." It doesn't stink of

false motives or hypocrisy. But instead, eternal life fills the room with the sweet fragrance of love.

And that brings us back to this episode with Mary and Judas. In their actions and attitudes, we can see the difference between someone who is connected to eternal life and someone who isn't. Mary lives out of abundance and Judas lives out of scarcity. Mary humbles herself at Jesus' feet and Judas tries to tell Jesus what to do. Mary anoints Jesus and frankly, Judas annoys him. Now, let's be clear that these are the extremes, and that we're always somewhere on this spectrum of feeling close to God or distant from God, often within the same day.

This isn't about shaming Judas or exalting Mary. It's about asking ourselves who we identify with more today. It's about connecting with these examples when we're full of fragrant love or wreaking of selfishness. And it's about knowing that no matter what we smell like, God loves us so much that he sent his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. It's hard to remember that because it's hard to really comprehend. That God's love for us is so abundant and extravagant that it cleanses us from sin and gives us eternal life. That there's nothing we can do to earn that love and nothing we can do to lose that love. All we have to do is take a deep breath and breathe in the sweet smell of pure love... and try to leave the bologna behind.

Amen