

19th Sunday Ordinary Time B 2018

August 12

Frazee/Callaway

In his letters St. Paul uses the phrase “Fragrant aroma” three times. (2 Cor 2:15, Phil 4:18, Eph 5:2) It is a phrase that appears in the Old Testament almost 50 times. St. Paul takes an old hallowed phrase and he gives it new meaning.

In the old testament when a sacrifice was offered on an altar, the odor of the burning meat went up to heaven, and God, to whom the sacrifice was offered, was supposed to feast upon that odor.

I have feasted many-a-morning on the smell of coffee brewing in the kitchen. The smell of freshly baked bread is a feast as good as the bread itself. In the Old Testament a sacrifice which had the odor of a sweet savor was specially pleasing and thought acceptable to the God.

St. Paul takes the old phrase and uses it to exemplify the sacrifice that Jesus brought to God. The sacrifice of Jesus was a life of perfect obedience to God and of perfect love for people, an obedience so absolute and a love so infinite that they accepted the Cross. What Paul says is: "Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loves us and handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering to God for a fragrant aroma."

In seminary I had a professor who insisted that our worship, as Catholics, should involve all the senses. He used to scream, “a church should *look* like a church and *smell* like a church!” What does a church smell like?

When I was a kid I thought every dental office smelled like menthol. I later learned that it was the smoke-stained hands of my dentist that smelled like menthol! What does a church smell like?

Of course, a church can smell like incense. The smell of incense is a sure sign that something important is happening. A church smells like incense, and it smells like bee's wax from candles constantly burning. Some church buildings smell a little musty because they have been with the community so long.

We, the church, the mystical body of Christ, are more than incense and wax. In 2 Corinthians St. Paul insists that "...we are the aroma of Christ for God..." Our tears are the sweet smell of salt when we weep with those who are weeping. Our brow contains the sweet smell of sweat when we work for our neighbor in need. Our hands contain the sweet smells of food when we care for those who are grieving. Twice, at baptism and at confirmation, our heads have been anointed with the sweet fragrance of chrism. We live as priests, prophets and kings every time we imitate Christ's obedience and love. And every time we do we are caught up in the fragrant aroma of his sacrificial offering.

Someone shared a prayer with me last week. It was new to me. It was an apology to God for the times we have used religion as a cover for apathy and neglect in the Christian life. If we want to look like the Church and smell like the Church, we had better act like the Church. Otherwise we lead little ones astray and we earn the harshest judgement.

In the life of Jesus, obedience and love became one and the same. He was obedient to the Father because he and the Father were one in love. Our obedience to the demands of the Christian life are no different than a life poured out in loving service.

Thank you for being the Church...not merely here but everywhere.