

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Pentecost 12 – August 16th and 19rd, 2012

Ephesians 4:30 -5:2

“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Dear children of God,

Aroma. Stench. Both those words have something in common, right? Both deal with the smell something gives off. But they are really very different. Aroma makes you think of freshly baked cookies, walking down a forest path with beautiful flowers livening the air and the smell of a freshly grilled steak. Stench, on the other hand, makes you think of a young boy who comes home after playing with his friends all day, a piece of garbage that did not hit the can and is discovered after 3 days and the liquid fertilizer that was just spread on the fields. Both words generically might mean the same, but in our understanding, they are miles apart.

Now, without thinking of bodily hygiene, I ask ‘How do you smell?’ Because, everyone does smell of something. In our lesson Paul makes that very clear. He says that people have one of two smells. Either they give off a fragrant aroma, one that is pleasing to God, or they give off the most repulsive scent, which in turn repulses God. So, our theme this morning, as odd as it might sound, is

Theme: We Smell!

- 1. By nature we stink horribly**
- 2. By grace we are a pleasing aroma to God**

Our lesson is from Ephesians. Unlike other letters like Corinthians, the Ephesians were facing no outstanding problems. This letter is a pick-me-up kind of letter. He knew the people knew the truth of Christ and salvation, and he wanted to bolster their faith. And his theme throughout the letter is that we, as believers, are united in Christ - part of his body, his family and his kingdom. Here and there Paul mixes in how this was done. The Holy Spirit brought us this faith in Christ and his work and united them and all of us as part of the Church.

In our lesson, Paul goes further. He gives some warnings and guidance. Vs. 1 tips us off as to what that warning is. He tells us not to grieve the Holy Spirit. Why not? Well, think about what the Spirit did for believers. He, through the Gospel, called us out of the darkness of sin. He brought to us the message of forgiveness. He turned our hearts of stone into hearts of faith. To forget that, to go back to old ways does indeed grieve the Holy Spirit. He who brought us out of sin doesn't want us to fall back into old behaviors and problems.

Think of a teacher. He or she spends days teaching a young child how to multiply fractions. At first the child does this the long way, making marks and dashes so he can count instead of using the proper procedure. The teacher then instructs the child on shortcuts and how to use math more efficiently. If the test comes around and the teacher sees the child reverting back to old ways instead of using what he or she took hours to teach the child, won't that grieve the teacher, making him or her think as if their teaching was futile?

For us to fail in remembering what the Spirit and Christ did for us and start going our own way grieves the Spirit who brought us to faith. And after starting out with that general point, Paul gets into

specifics as to how we do that. He tells us to get rid of a number of things. Each word he lists has a powerful picture behind it. Bitterness is always being irritable and thus disassociated with others. It doesn't take long for bitterness to boil into rage and anger, to move from the passive to the active. And with such attitudes, it is not much of a leap to acting on them, be it brawling, a physical thing, or slander, a verbal thing. And he closes by using the word malice. That word just sounds bad, doesn't it? Well, because it is. All of these actions and attitudes are things that grieve the Holy Spirit and is reverting to the old, Spirit less way of life from which we were called.

If you had to use the word aroma or stench for this list, which would it be? We'd all say stench. It is the kind of stench you get when the garbage container is full and has been baking in the sun for week until garbage pickup day. It is the stench of the football locker room after all the sweaty clothes has been brewing for a week or two. It is repulsive and horrible.

I hate to be so graphic, but this is all driving toward a point. That is how we, alone, without our Savior at our side, smell to God. God is love, everyone says. Yes, that is true, but without the work of Christ on our behalf, God is not a God of love. He is a God of justice. He is the God who expects all people to smell like fresh baked bread and recently bathed newborns. When he does not smell that, when the stench of sin is all that fills his nostrils, his only choice, and he is right in doing this, is to have no part with those who smell such way.

Again, that is what we were. That is what the Holy Spirit rescued us from. But it is hard to hear that. We want to think the way we helped a friend or neighbor has to make us smell a little better. We want to imagine that paying our dues at church rids us of some of the stink. We want to hope that, like a young man putting on cologne without showering, the good can outweigh the bad before God. But it can't. Good things do not replace sin. Nice acts don't erase failures. Who of us can honestly read that list of don'ts from Paul and say, "Thank God I never did any of those"? None of us can. Maybe we did not start a fistfight with the neighbor who hacked us off, but it was easy to rip him down to our wife. Maybe we don't sit at home and complain about everyone at church, but thinking it, have such bitter feelings, is just as bad. We may do a good job of keeping our rage in check when others are looking, but if our spouse, child or a coworker crosses us when no one is looking, watch out. Drop the good person bit. We aren't fooling ourselves and we certainly aren't fooling God. Confronted with the perfection God demands, his law, the reality is that we stink. We reek of sin. It is so a part of us bathing in 10,000 years of seemingly good deeds would not weaken the pungency one bit.

Have we hammered that home enough? Alone, we smell and smell bad. But thank God we're not alone. Before going on to what God expects of us, jump to the end of our lesson. Paul reminds us not only are we not alone, we have a Savior. Christ loved us, even in our sin stink, so much He became a sacrifice for us. Yes, God is just. He cannot look the other way from sin. It has to be paid for. That is what Jesus did. He paid for it all. 1000s of years of sin stench, the disgusting scent from billions of sinners was on him when he died. But as true God, he could take it. He could take that stench away. And that he did. We call that forgiveness.

And he did not just make us absent of smell or neutral. He gave us a pleasing scent. Paul calls it a fragrant offering, an aroma pleasing to God. The smell that pleases God is perfection. That is what Jesus was and is. He is the Febreeze that roots out the bad and makes things smell nice. He removed sin completely and made us smell daisy fresh, finished laundry fresh and right out of the shower fresh. The perfection, the beautiful aroma God demands is ours because of what Jesus did. We call that being clothed in a robe of righteousness.

Isn't that the best news you are going to hear all week? Of course. Your sins won't follow you. They are gone. You need not toss and turn in bed over the failure of the past day. You need not wrestle with God long enough that he'll finally show his mercy. You have it in Christ. It is yours as you sit there. Rejoice in that.

And not only rejoice in it, live in it. You are clean. You smell good. Do you want to grieve the Spirit by jumping back into the mud of sin from which he pulled you? Of course not. We will want

to, as Paul writes, be kind to others and compassionate, for they are people Jesus loves as much as he loves us – he died for them as well. We will forgive them, for our billions of sins have been forgiven by Jesus. We will love them, for who are we to withhold love from someone Jesus thought enough of to give his life on the cross?

To sum it up, Paul says we're to imitate God. The word he uses is mime. Mimes are annoying. Face it. You want them to go away. But God wants us to be his mimes, to love and have compassion as he does. And he doesn't just want us to act the part. He wants us to do it as people with the aroma of forgiveness, the scent of eternal life and the smell of their Savior. We are God's children. Children want to act like their fathers. Our Father is perfect. In Christ, we are too. So let us, in thanks, mime the one who did all and gave up all for us.

To say putting this faith into practice is easy would be a lie. So too it would be a lie to think that we can perfectly imitate our God. But as we return to the cross, as we realize the aroma Christ became for us and remember how we smell to God – perfect and holy – the Spirit will not grieve over us, but will work through that message to strengthen us, to lift us up, to keep us clean and to guide us in his ways. Often times I tell you not to get hung up on the introduction to a sermon. But leave today remembering you smell. You formerly stank of sin. Now you are the scent of perfection. May the Lord keep us fresh in that smell through the Gospel, and may the Spirit make this glorious smell fill all people in creation as well. Amen.