

It Stinketh.

A Sermon for Plymouth Congregation United Church of Christ.

Sunday, March 9, 2008.

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Quick. How many kinds of air freshener can you think of? I know. It sounds like a random question but I was in the air freshener aisle at Target the other day and was blown away by the array of choices in front of me. It felt like I was in a bad “Forrest Gump” spoof: you’ve got your light bulb rings and your scented sticks, not to mention the plug in gels and the plug in oils. Then there’s oil candles, gel candles and wax candles not to mention wax beads and canisters full of scented wax. If you are strictly old school, you can also find Glade spray and Airwick, too—except the Glade comes in at least a dozen scents now (used to be only lilac and lavender) and the Airwick is something you can be proud to display. No need for crocheted covers anymore.

Judging by the vast display of products in this aisle (and I haven’t even touched on the carpet, upholstery, or closet fresheners that were there, too), I’d say that covering up life’s stink is quite a lucrative business. Evidently people don’t much care for stinky things—which makes a lot of sense as usually stinky things indicate that we need to deal with something unpleasant, something rotten, something gross, or even something ugly that we have been avoiding for awhile. Where’s the fun in that? It’s a whole lot easier to mask the stench with the fresh scent of pine or the refreshing smell of a mountain breeze.

It you get a good whiff of those manufactured scents, though, you’ll notice that they are at best a little “off”. Expecting that a soothing, serene atmosphere can magically appear from an aerosol can is probably a bit unrealistic. When I think of my childhood piano teacher’s bathroom, I can still taste the chemicals in the air. She was a little spray happy. I’m sure I was in my mid-20s before I figured out that lavender is actually a soothing, pleasant aroma! I can’t blame her, though. We all want life to be a little more soothing, a little more pleasant, a little less stressful, and a lot more happy.

Let's face facts: life stinks sometimes. Sure, it would be cool that if we only had enough faith and just said all the right words and did all of the right things and went to church the appropriate number of times and prayed all of the right prayers and gave just the right of money that life would be a bed of roses. But it just doesn't work out that way. It didn't work that way for Jesus and it doesn't work that way for us, either.

Death happens. Literally and figuratively, death happens. We don't have to like it. Heck, I don't think we're supposed to like it. Obviously Jesus didn't like it. He pretty much spent all of his time trying to get rid of it in all kinds of ways: he fed the hungry, he included the outcasts, he challenged the status quo, healed the sick, touched the untouchable, and loved the unloveable. He taught and preached and challenged people to give up their old ways, die to their old lives, and come alive in and through him because honestly that's the only way to really live.

But people didn't get it. Not even Mary and Martha who, along with their brother Lazarus, may very well have been some of Jesus' very best friends. And yet, when Lazarus dies, the girls get upset with Jesus because he didn't come right away and prevent the tragedy from happening.

Martha, being the logical one of the two girls, had all of the right words. She met Jesus when he finally arrived by saying "Where have you been! You should have been here! Whatever you ask, God gives you. You could have done something." To which Jesus said, "Everybody who believes in me lives—do you believe that's true?" And Martha shrugs, "Yeah, sure, whatever...on the last day, everybody lives...and you are the Son of God..." and then she went to get Mary. Maybe Mary could get through to him.

When Mary approached Jesus, she said just about the same thing as Martha, "If you'd only have been here..." But then she started to cry. The Jewish mourners around her started crying, too. And then Jesus started to cry. Why? Well, because (as Martha says in the King James Version of this story): "He stinketh."

This is one of those rare times when I actually prefer the KJV. In the NRSV (the version of the Bible we use around here most often) the text says that “there was a stench”. But stinketh just seems to sum it all up pretty nicely. The whole thing stinketh. Lazarus died leaving his two sisters to fend for themselves in a world that is less than female-friendly. They were probably a little scared of how they would make ends meet. That stinks.

Like I said earlier, Jesus had been incredibly passionate about making God’s kingdom a reality on earth. And after all of this time and all of the miracles and all that they’ve shared, Martha and Mary (two of his very best friends) still don’t get it. That stinks.

Lazarus’ resuscitation raises hopes for some but it also raises eyebrows for others. This miracle will be the final straw for the powers that be. In giving Lazarus back his life, Jesus pretty much insures that his own life will be taken away. Quid pro quo. That stinks.

So Jesus wept. He wept because people still believed that death could win. What would he have to do to make them believe otherwise? Ahhh...that story comes in a couple of weeks. For now, though, we have to stay here, with death and darkness and stink.

And it does stink. That smell is the smell of fear: the fear of death, that is. And the fear of what it might take to let go and live as God wants us to live, the way Jesus taught us to live. It’s the fear of what people might say, or think. It’s the fear of losing control (or, I guess, the fear of losing the perception of control). It’s the fear of doing something different, something new, even if that new thing brings unbridled joy. That fear stinks.

And it kills us. It makes us dead: dead to ourselves, dead to possibility, dead to the needs of the world. All is not lost, though, for even death cannot separate us from the love of God. God still performs miracles and brings the dead back to life. It happens all the time because God just doesn’t like death any more than we do. God wants us to live. So God will continue to yell at us to come out and believe that what we do and say here in this place is more than hear a good story. What we do and say here in this place truly is life-giving, to us and those around us. God will continue to hound us until we accept the fact

that we are loved, no matter what. And that absolutely nothing in the whole wide world will take God's love away from us. Not anything.

I've asked Eli Becker to sing a prayer to close the sermon today—a psalm of how really, of how God lifts us up, raises us up even in the darkest of times, making us more than we ever could be on our own.

Let us pray:

(Eli sings)

When we are down, God lifts us up to do things that we could never imagine possible. Do not be afraid. Let go. And cut back on the air freshener. It's going to be OK. Actually, it's going to be better than OK.

Amen.