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SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY OF PENTECOST

October 5, 2014

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## **“A Fragrant Offering and Sacrifice”**

*(Ephesians 5:1-2)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“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” (Eph. 5:1-2).*

*LWML Sunday*

## Collect of the Day

Gracious God, You gave Your Son into the hands of sinful men who killed Him. Forgive us when we reject Your unfailing love, and grant us the fullness of Your salvation; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

If you were a fragrance, what kind of fragrance would you choose to be? The fragrance of baking bread, or the spoiled raw chicken that was forgotten in the back of the refrigerator? Would you rather be the aroma of brewing coffee or of rotting road kill? Of the Linden tree outside the front doors of Good Shepherd when in full bloom, or the putrid potatoes in the pantry? Silage or sewage? Sliced lemons or sliced Limburger? If you had your choice, what kind of fragrance would you be?

In our text, Paul says get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. These things are not a fragrant offering to the Lord. They would not make for a sweet incense. They are odious and offensive to God. They reek to high heaven . . . but not just to high heaven.

When we are these things, we pollute the world rather than perfume it. When we smolder with anger and resentment we become that burn barrel out back, smoldering plastics all the day long, emitting foul and toxic gases. When we malign another's reputation, the fragrance we leave behind is not the sweet smell of incense to the Lord, but the pestiferous stink of the devil.

Nothing more cripples the mission of the church at large (or a congregation) than the poor behavior of Christians. The most efficient way to turn someone off to the faith is for you and me to do the exact opposite of what Paul is here suggesting. Instead of getting rid of these things, we tolerate the bitterness and the anger, we sanction the slander and give safe harbor to the malice.

Jesus said, "If your brother sins against you go and show him his fault, just between the two of you." Work it out. Try to find a way. Strive for reconciliation. Be the adult and take the initiative. What is *not* acceptable, however, is to harbor the bitterness and anger, or look for the opportunity to slander his reputation. It's also not acceptable to give ear to the one who is

doing the slandering. That is just as much a sin against the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment. It is the sin of omission. Proverbs 31, “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves.” Luther wrote in the explanation, “Defend your neighbor, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.” Peter wrote, “Love covers over a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).

For the sake of the church “get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.” Don’t just try to hide them or mask them. Get rid of them.

Grandma and grandpa always kept a can of Glade in the upstairs bathroom of the farmhouse. As a boy I found that to be novel and wonderful and used it liberally. Imagine, the whole upstairs smelled of artificial lilacs in the middle of January! Before Glade was invented, Uncle Richard tells me they kept a cigar up there. They would light it, take a couple of puffs, and then promptly extinguish it. That’s one way to deal with foul air. Mask it with something stronger. Paul’s not asking us to mask our bitterness or slander. He’s asking us to get rid of it outright. Replace it with something sweet.

“Be kind and compassionate to one another” he continues, “forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God ... 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.” When we imitate the love of Christ, it’s as if we are perfuming the air rather than polluting it. When we forgive with Christ-like forgiveness, this produces a rare, sweet, attractive aroma in the world. When we are Christ-like in our sacrificial generosity, our compassion, our acts of mercy, all this is a bouquet, a sweet fragrance not just to the Lord but to the world around us. It doesn’t repel people; it draws them in. They can hardly help themselves. Even the most gruff and hardened of humanity cannot simply walk past a flowering crab apple tree in spring without noticing the wonderful fragrance. It draws them in like bees to its sweet aroma. When Christians are kind and

compassionate, generous and forgiving, it is a compelling fragrance even to the most hardened of hearts.

So . . . ask yourself, “What’s that smell?” Is it winsome or loathsome? Is it sweet incense or the acrid smoke from the burn barrel? Does it draw people in or drive them away? If you’re like me, you are quite capable of polluting **and** perfuming the air. Sin is the stuff we’re made of, after all. It’s who we are. We not only commit sin; we are sinners. It’s our very nature. So if there is to be any help or hope, it’s going to have to come from outside of ourselves.

Paul points us to it. “Walk in love” he writes, “as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” He’s reminding us of the sacrificial system of the Old Testament era. It was God’s way of forgiving his people at that time. The sins of the people were confessed onto the head of a spotless lamb, and that lamb was put to death. The imputed sin died with that lamb. It was burned, and the sin went up in smoke and that was a pleasing aroma to the Lord. It’s not that he’s blood-thirsty. It’s that he loves to forgive, but forgiving it is not the same as overlooking or tolerating. To forgive sin, his justice must be served, otherwise he would be unjust. The author of Hebrews writes, “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb. 9:22).

So we have all those little sacrifices of the Old Testament for the forgiveness of sins. They point to Christ, and, in fact, were made efficacious by the one, big sacrifice of the Lamb of God who takes to himself the sin of the world. Never was a man more foul and rank with sin than Jesus, the Lamb of God. That’s what this text is about, which speaks of Christ being a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Though voluntary, the death of Jesus was, of course, horrific, but it was the right death. Only his death would suffice for the sins of the world. Again, it’s not that God is blood-thirsty. It’s that he loves to forgive, loves to save, and that can only happen through the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, a fragrant offering to the Lord.

One of the fragrances I love most is the top of a baby's head right after it has been bathed. You swaddle it in a towel in your lap and with your nose you find that circle of hair on the top and you breathe it in. It's fleeting; you got to enjoy it while you can. Similarly, you've been bathed in the waters of baptism. You've been swaddled in Christ's cloak of righteousness. The stench of your sin has been washed away. But the sweet, clean fragrance of baptism is not fleeting. It endures the life-time. We are still sinners, but now also "dearly loved children". We're still sinners, but he washes away our sin. We're still sinners, but now we strive to return to him a life that is aromatic and sweet smelling.

We imitate Christ and make *our* lives a fragrant offering to the Lord. Paul tells us how: "Be kind and compassionate with one another, forgiving others just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, 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."

When you, the Women of Good Shepherd and of the LWML, as baptized children of God, share the hope you have in Christ, that is a fragrant sacrifice and offering to the Lord. When the LWML gives generously to missions near and far, that too is a fragrant offering to the Lord. When we in faithful obedience, study the Word, when we dwell together in unity, when we faithfully hold on to the confession of the faith in a perverse and twisted generation, when we seek peace and work out reconciliation, sweet fragrances rise up to our God and Father. Every act of obedience, every faith motivated work of the saints of God, every effort to share the faith, these are all sweet-smelling fragrances to the Lord. 2 Corinthians 2:15, "For we are the aroma of Christ among those being saved." Romans 12:1, "Present your bodies as living sacrifices." And the author of Hebrews writes, "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (13:16).

One last thing: Remember Earl Oestreich? He was a

member of this congregation, a retired dairy farmer, a self taught musician. I went out to see him at his farm shortly before his death. He was resting in the same room in which he had been born some 8 decades earlier. I asked him once if he ever missed the cows. He answered with surprising clarity: “Not one little bit.” But after a thoughtful pause he added, “I do miss the smells . . . the cut hay, the warm milk, the silage, even the manure.” I had to think about that last one a bit. The kind that comes from cows and horses is less offensive on the scale, and I suppose if I were around it every day I would miss it too if it was suddenly absent. It struck me how few the smells are by comparison in my own vocation.

In any event, we wondered out loud about what heaven will smell like. Of course the Bible doesn't say, but it does say there will be a feast . . . rich food, the best of meats, finest of wines . . . sounds to me like some alluring fragrances. It's only guess work, but Earl and I figured many of the fragrances we enjoy on earth we will also recognize in heaven, for they are good and why would the Lord ever take good things away. They will only be made better in heaven, without compromises . . . who knows . . . flowering trees, and green meadows and the mist from clear, cold, flowing rivers, honeysuckle and torn basil and cracked pepper and, if Earl had his way, maybe even the sweet smell from his pipe, his own incense to the Lord, somehow modified and improved so that it won't cause anyone to wheeze or sneeze. But whatever the aromas, they'll be good. All of them will have been made possible for us by God's Son Jesus who gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Amen.



