

"Fragrant Sacrifices and Offerings"

Ephesians 5:2

October 5, 2014

17th Sunday After Pentecost (LWML Sunday)

The sense of smell is a powerful one. It can give us much pleasure and it can cause us great discomfort. It can attract us and it can repel us. The fragrant scent of bread baking in the oven will draw us to the kitchen. The pungent odor of a backed up toilet in the bathroom will send us going in the opposite direction. No one would confuse a fragrant scent with a pungent odor. Yet that is precisely the danger of a day like LWML Sunday: distinguishing a fragrant scent from a pungent odor.

We naturally would like to think that many pious acts of service to God and our neighbor are sweet smelling offerings to our Lord because of how good they are. God should enjoy the fragrant scent of our church attendance, our financial offerings, our service on various boards and committees at church, our participation in LWML, the good deeds we do in our community, and so on.

LWML Sunday can be just a time for our ladies to take pride in all the good they have accomplished by their societies in their local congregation, by their mites in District and National mission projects and so on. LWML Sunday worship can become a thinly veiled effort to praise, not God, but the women of the LWML for their hard efforts.

We are not the only ones who think so highly of ourselves. Even St. Paul thought He was doing a pretty sweet job of serving the Lord. He writes to the Philippians in our epistle reading for today, "I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless." (Philippians 3:4-6) Paul had gone above and

beyond the call of duty when it came to His service to the Lord. He probably thought God was duly impressed with such a fragrant offering.

How wrong he was! How wrong we are! Anyone who thinks their stuff don't stink is wrong. St. Paul admitted it. He said, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss." In fact, Paul considered everything he had and everything he did as "rubbish" (a polite translation of a Greek word which means "human excrement").

Why did Paul say this? He recognized something that we often forget. All of our efforts to serve God and serve our neighbor have been tainted with sin. It's like going for a walk in the woods with brand new clothes on and getting squirted by a skunk. You and your clothes may still look good, but both still stink. In the same way, although our offerings to the Lord may seem good to us on their own, having been corrupted by sin, they stink to a holy and righteous God.

But some people seem so much better than others. What about them and their good deeds? Picture the holiness of God as being the length and breadth of the Grand Canyon and you, in your effort to do good, are trying to jump the Grand Canyon on a bicycle. Does it really make any difference that someone makes it 10 feet out from the rim of the canyon while someone else only makes it out 5 feet?

The Word of God says, "all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment (or "like filthy rags" as another translation says)." Now, if our "righteous deeds" – the best we can do - are polluted and filthy and stink to high heaven, what does that say about our bad deeds? They are even worse.

There is an offering to God that is fragrant and sweet smelling. It is not to be found in anything we do. And it is not to be found in a fragrant and sweet smelling place. It is to be found in a wooden cross and the foul stench of blood and sweat. It is not found in a good and moral life, but in a painful and shameful death. The fragrant offering which smells so sweet to God is found in the crucifixion of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Our text for this special Sunday says, “Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God..” What makes this so pleasing to God? It is not just what Christ did but why He did it and what purpose it accomplished.

Jesus came into this world and died by crucifixion, not because He had done any crime or because He had been forced into it. When John the Baptist first saw Jesus approaching, he declared, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) Jesus came voluntarily because He loved us, although there was nothing in us worthy of that love. Jesus came to offer himself for us as a Passover lamb. Only this lamb was not the lamb of any particular family as a sacrifice for their sins as a Passover lamb normally was. This lamb was the lamb of God offered as a sacrifice for the sin of the entire world.

Jesus went to the cross with all of our sin tainted efforts at good – those polluted garments – as well as all of our deepest and darkest sins of thought, word, and deed and offered Himself for us. God is pleased by this offering, not just because Jesus obeyed His will and did it, but also because of what it accomplished.

Jesus' offering allowed God to be true to His holiness and justice while, at the same time, showing mercy to humanity whom He loved. Jesus endured all of God's righteous wrath against your sin and my sin. Jesus accepted all the punishment for your sin and my sin – the pain and suffering of crucifixion, the anguish of being separated from His Father (which is what hell is), and the agony of death. Jesus atoned for our sins by winning forgiveness for them all. By doing that, He has saved us from the punishment for their sins by freeing us from the curse of death and eternal separation from God in hell.

God the Father was so pleased by His Son's obedience and so accepting of this fragrant offering and sacrifice to Him that He raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus' resurrection is God's ratification of Jesus' sacrifice for us and our sins. Jesus' resurrection is also the promise and guarantee that our life will continue after death and through the grave to eternal life in the presence of the Lamb who was slain and who has begun His reign.

This fragrant offering transforms our standing before God. Forgiven of the foul stench of our sin and freed from the odor of death, we ourselves have become sweet smelling and pleasing to God. We have been changed from enemy to friend, slave to child, and sinner to saint.

More than that, the the fragrant offering of Jesus Christ on the cross transforms our actions before God. Now, everything you do in service to God and neighbor has become a sweet smelling offering to the Lord, pleasing to Him and accepted by Him for the sake of Jesus. In a sermon on our text for today, Martin Luther put it this way:

”This expression Paul takes from the Old Testament. There the temporal sacrifices are described as being ‘a sweet-smelling savor’ unto God; that is, they were acceptable and well-pleasing to him, but not, as the Jews imagined, because of the value of the work or the sacrifices in themselves. For such thoughts they were chastised by the prophets often enough. They were acceptable on the ground of the true sacrifice which they foreshadowed and encircled.”

Understand what this means. When you hear the words of Matthew 28 – “Go and make disciples of all nations” and you, in faith, share the Gospel with someone who does not yet know Jesus or did know Jesus but has fallen away – the Father receives that effort as a fragrant sacrifice and offering. When you ladies of the LWML give your pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters, and dollars in the interest of missions, our Father receives those gifts as fragrant sacrifices and offerings. When any of us serves our neighbor in love motivated by faith – giving a ride, providing financial help, giving an ear to listen or a shoulder to cry on, our Father receives all of that as a fragrant sacrifice and offering. When we together as a congregation in obedience to the Word of God, hear the Word of God, study the Word of God, share the Word of God, confess the Word of God and live together in unity and love, fragrant sacrifices and offerings rise up to the nostrils of our merciful, holy, and gracious God and Father.

What if our efforts are not spectacular and not noticed by anyone? What if they are not successful or do not change the world? It doesn’t matter. It’s like when your child fingerpaints a picture for you and brings it home. No art critic or museum would see any value in it. However, you, because of your love for your child, believe it is the most beautiful picture in the world. You will hang such pictures on your refrigerator until there is no room. For such a picture is precious and beautiful in your eyes.

In the same way, every act of obedience, every work of the saints of God, every act of faith, every word spoken in faith rises up to the Father as a sweet-smelling savor and sacrificial offering. The world may not notice such actions or even care. Yet your Father in heaven accepts such things, done in faith, as most precious and beautiful, not because of their intrinsic value, but for the sake of Jesus Christ who “loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Amen