

2 Corinthians 2:14 Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. ¹⁵For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. ¹⁶To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?

Dear Friends in Christ,

THE AROMA OF CHRIST

On Friday morning at church, a window was open to let the spring air in. I was getting the bulletin printed off (which is going to get a lot easier with that new copier coming this week – Praise to God for your generous offerings for his work!), I was getting the bulletin done and I smelled it: the dusty smell of rain after a dry spell. With the smell came memories. But it seemed out of place. The forecast had not even mentioned the possibility of rain on Friday morning. I must have imagined the smell. After a moment of memories, I looked out the window—and the pavement was wet! My nose had not lied.

Many of you know that when we have a German service, Steve Reinheimer puts out quite a bit of German cuisine. Watch people when he tells them that that small block of pale cheese on the end is limburger cheese. Watch the noses crinkle. See people draw back, trying to keep their distance, especially their noses, from the notoriously stinky cheese.

Elsewhere in the Bible Jesus uses senses of sight and taste to describe God’s people. He says that we are the “*salt of the earth*” and the “*light of the world.*” Here, in 2 Corinthians, God’s word appeals to our sense of smell.

God’s gift of smell is an interesting one. Day to day, we rely on it less than our other senses of sight, sound, touch and taste. Yet smell is uniquely powerful. Smell is the only sense tied directly to the brain. The other four senses have to go through nerves, but smell has a direct pathway from the back of your nasal passages into the brain. (I don’t quite understand that, but that is what those who know say.) Because of this, smell gets our attention in a way nothing else does. Here is something else strange, or maybe not so strange, our sense of smell is tied much more tightly to memories than the other senses are. Smell a smell, and you are transported to a specific time and place in your past— like Friday’s surprise rain shower.

I. A Smell to the World

In verse 14, God’s says, “***Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.***” Let’s unpack that. The verse mentions a “triumphal procession”. What’s that? Back in the ancient world, war was maybe not as destructive as modern war, but it was even more brutal. After an especially successful campaign, the Roman general would come back to Rome and celebrate a “***triumphal procession,***” a victory parade. In the parade, chained captives led the way, after them came the victorious general in a chariot covered in flowers, incense burning. Following him were his soldiers, unarmed but wearing fragrant laurel crowns, tokens of victory. The crowds showered flowers upon the victors. The triumphal procession bathed the city streets in sweet smells. Paul pictures Christ as the general and we as his soldiers. All around us is the perfumed air of knowing Christ, the Savior. He is the victor over death, sin and the devil.

God desires that even as we return to work, to school, to our homes, he desires that this fragrance spreads through our life so that even outsiders know the aroma of Christ. Now perhaps you can

understand better verse 14, *“Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.”*

May the fragrance of knowing Christ spread all around you. Here is what it looks like, or smells like:

A few months ago, we were watching a high school musical. We enjoyed the production. There were, if I remember, three main parts. Most of the way through, I leaned over to Lisa and said, “That one girl just carries herself differently. She has a modesty, not a shyness or strangeness, just a modesty. If I had to guess, I would guess that she is a Christian.” I didn’t think more of it. I wasn’t judging the other actors. Perhaps all of the main characters were strong Christians. But there was something about the one girl that just said, “Christian” to me. A few months later, Lisa told me that she had kind of accidentally found out that said actress was indeed a very sincere Christian.

Could people pick you out of a crowd as a person of faith, even if they saw you in a high school musical?

It happened again a few weeks ago. We were on a tour in an orange orchard. The orchard owner himself led the tour. This orchard owner had much to be proud of. His family had founded it way back in the 1800’s. They had tended the trees and the land for generations. They had their better times and worse times. He told us about the old ways of doing things and the new. There was something about him. No bragging. He avoided anything even in the general direction of profanity or vulgarity. He had a joy, not a self-centered joy, but a contented joy. And he never mentioned his faith. But you could just tell. After the tour, my dad told me that last time on the tour, he and the owner did have a chance to talk faith issues, and he was indeed a professing, practicing Christian.

Would people guess you are a believer, even if you were leading a tour and never mentioned Jesus?

I can’t read hearts. I confess that freely. But we all have those times when we can read people, and without judging, we make guesses. Does the aroma of Christ hang around you?

I think that is where Paul is going when he talks about us as the aroma of Christ. There are times to be explicitly and verbally Christian. But even when those times are not there, we are to always be distinctly Christian. Like a scented candle, scenting a room which is full of people, or which is still scenting the room even if there aren’t any people in the room at all. We are the aroma of Christ to the world around us. At least I hope you are. I hope that your faith is not hidden like a lamp under a bushelbasket, that you have not lost your saltiness, that you are not like these new varieties of roses that hardly have a smell at all.

Through us, may the smell of Christ spread into the world, in our words and actions.

II. Is It a Fragrance or a Stench?

Now there is another force at work here. God wants the message of Christ to be a sweet-smelling message of life. However, it is otherwise.

Smells can bring out very different feelings in different people. The first time I was served a bowl of a certain kind of fish at a church in Africa, I could smell something during the church service. To me, it smelled like a wet dog, a warm wet dog. As the service progressed, I was hoping it wasn’t the food. After the service, when the meal was put in front of me, I thought, “Yep, it was the food.” So I said a prayer, not so much of thanksgiving as for strength of stomach. Most people in the village of Kapalasa would have been very happy to have the meal that was put in front of me. To me, the smell was a cause of nausea and distress, to the rest of the congregation it was mouth watering.

If you have gone to other parts of the world – Korea, Afghanistan, Iraq – you have smelled it. What smells like a delicacy to the locals smells like garbage to you. And Paul says the same thing about Christians: *“To [those who are perishing] we are the smell of death; to [those who are being*

saved, we are] the fragrance of life.” To those who reject the message of Jesus, we stink. You can't put enough salt or pepper on us, enough air freshener. To those who don't know Jesus, we just stink. As Proverbs 29:27 says, *“The righteous detest the dishonest; the wicked detest the upright.”*

We have ways that we follow out of reverence to God and his Word. We have things that we do and won't do. These are a stench in the nose of those who do not care about what God's word says about Jesus. A pastor shared that recently after church a visitor greeted him at the door, “This is the first time I ever worshiped at this church, and it is the last. You have offended me worse than I have ever been offended in my life. You refused Communion to me.” Sadly, a Biblical stance on God's holiest meal is a stench to many.

What happened when our vice president, a professed Christian, about a year ago, said that he never has a dinner with a woman unless his wife is also present? Hundreds of editorials appeared about what an evil man Mike Pence is for being concerned about Christian behavior. And though the #metoo movement showed up a few months later, his respect for his Lord and the women around him continues to be criticized to this day. Remember, *“To those who are perishing we are the smell of death.”* And what do you do when you smell death? You cover your nose. You get out of the room. We might like the aroma of Christ. Many do not.

Don't expect your Christian ways to always be popular. Some people think you stink. Which is to be expected, but here is what happens. We get so worried about other people's opinions that we try and pretty up. We try and make ourselves more pleasing to people who have little good to say about us. And if you live or work in a place where you face disapproval day after day, you are in a combat zone. It is exhausting fighting people's godless expectations of what you should be like, what you should do. It is demoralizing having people criticize you, ostracize you and exclude you just because you are the *“aroma of Christ.”*

In our weakness, we give in. “Let's make ourselves a little less smelly.” We don't speak up when we should. We say things to please those around us, even though we shouldn't say it. We act in ways that people would never be able to guess whether we are a child of Christ or a child of the world. Cover the aroma of Christ! Then people won't turn up their noses at us, right?

Which is when we must go back to Christ, because when we cover up Christ, we deny Christ. We can't say, “I'll try to do better next time.” That won't cut it. You can't make up for your faults before God. You can't.

But there is a way. It is first: “God, be merciful to me a sinner. Forgive me for Jesus sake.” And then, assured of forgiveness, walking out of God's house right with God, *then* we can say, “Yes, I will by God's strength do better next time. I will continue to fight this world's expectations of me. I will strive to be the salt, the light, the aroma of Christ in this world.”

And when you do act out the life that Christ has given you through his death, you will find encouragement and support that you didn't expect. *“To those who are being saved you are the fragrance of life.”* Not only does God love you, God's people love you. We are so glad that you carry the aroma of Christ. You find people to share your burdens. You find people who love to hear about your victories, especially victories in faith. Tell us about them! You are the fragrance of life to us too!

The Aroma of Christ. May you always carry it. May we always look like, sound like, yes smell like, Christ.

When some don't like your Christian smell, remember, that that is to be expected. Don't be demoralized. Christ also is the smell of death to them. But when you get discouraged by the world, remember that you are the fragrance of life to God's people. Amen.