

**December 3, 2006**

**First Sunday of Advent – “The Smells of Christmas”** *(Based on ideas from Dr. Steve Estep)*

**2 Cor 2:14-17 (NIV)**

But 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. 15 For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. 16 To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? 17 Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.

Pine trees, spiced apple cider, candles, a wood-burning fire, peppermint candy canes, my wife's home baked cookies and pies. Man, do these things smell good! Because of things like this, it's not just beginning to feel a lot like Christmas, it's beginning to smell a lot like Christmas. I've heard the sense of smell is the strongest sense connected to our memory. Maybe that's why the aroma industry is so huge. Candles, plug-ins, air fresheners, deodorizers, air fresheners for your car, perfumes, smell-good deodorants (when we left for our mission trip to Louisiana one of the guys was running late, couldn't find his own deodorant and grabbed his wife's. Joe Herrmann was sitting next to him and finally said, "Boy, you smell good!"). There are enough stimulants for our sniffers to keep us happy no matter where we are or what our favorite scent might be.

It's easy to associate certain smells with certain experiences. In late March and early April I can smell the start of Baseball season. There's something different about the air, and the grass that changes. I can smell it. It smells like baseball. There are smells connected with Thanksgiving, and definitely a smell connected with Christmas Eve if you come from an Italian family like I am, who cooks a lot of fish on that day. It's the same with Advent. What stands out about Advent is not just the sights and sounds of Christmas coming, but the smells.

It was probably that way for Mary and Joseph on the first Christmas. I imagine after that holy night in Bethlehem when the Son of God became flesh, the smell of a barn had a whole new meaning. Never again would they smell hay the same way. It was associated with an experience that transformed the smell of a barn into the smell of a miracle. It was the smell of God come to earth. It was the smell of life.

When I think about the smells of Christmas from my childhood, I recall the smell of pine from our real Christmas tree (I miss that smell in the sanctuary now that the Fire Marshal will not allow us to have a real tree. And I miss that smell in my home- Ann's dad had a nursery and garden center. He sold Christmas trees every year and one of the requirements of dating his daughter was to sell trees. So for many years he would give us and we would have in our home a real tree. We now have had an artificial tree for many years, but I miss that pine smell that I remember from my childhood). I recall my Grandma's house, of freshly baked Italian delights. I even have good memories of smelling my Grandpa's cellar when he would take us to see his *precepio* (A *precepio* was a manger or Nativity Scene like the ones we have displayed in our church. It was

originally done by St. Francis of Assisi in 1223 which he used as a visual while he taught about the birth of Jesus. My Grandfather had a model in his cellar about 12 feet long x 10 feet deep of the town of Bethlehem at the time of Christ's Birth with a manger scene in the center. I can smell it now as I think of it). These are smells of pleasant memories

However, I also think of the smell of Iselin New Jersey. Have you ever been to Iselin, New Jersey? Iselin had a distinctive smell, especially passing the refineries on the way to Iselin. My aunt, my mother's sister, and uncle and my cousins lived for awhile in Iselin. My aunt was dying of cancer. One year when I was growing up, we went there for Christmas. It would be our last Christmas with my aunt before she died. I hated going there, it smelled like death.

We made several trips just before she died, the last one being at Christmas time...until the funeral. We would load up the car and headed out, but you could smell when you were getting close to Iselin. It stunk to high heaven. I don't know, maybe it's better today now that the EPA is more active.

My own experience as a kid taught me that sometimes the smells surrounding Christmas aren't just the good ones like pine trees and baked goodies. In fact, I think in a lot of ways, we can all relate to the way life was in Iselin, because the truth is, we don't have to live in the shadow of a refinery to know how stinky life can be.

The world can really stink. It's been that way ever since sin contaminated the Garden of Eden. The world we live in stinks because of sin. There's a stench because of abuse and divorce, poverty and injustice. What's going on in Iraq stinks. The animosity between Israel and Palestine reeks. Prisons filled to capacity smell like hopelessness. The poison being manufactured in meth labs in our own town is a stench. Teen pregnancy; an out-of-control media that promotes sex and violence; basketball games that break out into brawls; kids killed in drunk-driving accidents. It stinks, it stinks, it stinks!

The world Paul lived in was pretty much full of stink too—literally and figuratively. Besides open trenches that served as a sewer system, the world then was as full of the stench of sin as it is now. One of his biggest challenges was to help people coming out of the stench figure out what it meant to live in Jesus Christ. Teaching how to live like Christ in an ungodly world was a "How to live in stink and come out smelling like a rose" kind of thing. But the purpose and power of Christianity has never been only in the power of a pure life in an impure world, of a sweet-smelling soul in a sea of stink. That's huge in and of itself, but that alone isn't the whole picture. We're not called just to live in stink and come out smelling like a rose, but to invade the stink with another aroma.

To put it in today's terms, we Christians are what God wants to use as His air fresheners for the world. We are the plug-ins, the scented candles; we are the distributors of the pleasant smelling presence of God. We are to be the aroma of Christ while living in a world that often stinks to high heaven.

To those who believe: The aroma of Christ is spread with the smile or hug from a friend visiting the sick. The fragrance of the knowledge of Christ is spread by adults who invest in teaching and loving children. The aroma of Christ is spread when a familiar voice offers encouragement on the other end of the phone when you answer it.

Paul says we spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ to those who are being saved, and to those who are perishing: What does that smell like? It smells like a couple with a boatload of kids adopting the other kids in the neighborhood who have had no Christian influence. It smells like a righteous life held strong even when it's surrounded by sin, which means that for those who embrace a way of life without God, sometimes we're the ones who don't smell very well. It smells like the lone person exercising self-control in a crisis situation. The aroma of Christ is spread in jails where prisoners are visited, in pantries where the hungry are fed, and in conversations with lost friends, neighbors, and relatives when the gospel is shared. Through us—that's how God wants to get the aroma out. Both to those who are being saved, and to those who are perishing. We are the "aromatherapy" the world needs.

Sometimes it can feel like we're one 8-oz. can trying to fumigate an entire landfill. That's probably why after saying we are the aroma of Christ, called to spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere, Paul goes on to say, "Who is equal to such a task?" (v. 16). He recognized his own inadequacy. In his own strength it was a losing battle. In our own strength the stink of the world overcomes the scent of the Christ who came to save it, which really makes me glad we're not asked to spread the fragrance of Christ in our own strength.

As I think my aunts house in Iselin I want to point out that right across the street was the Perisi family. They were some pretty wonderful people. They were so good to my aunt and her family and so good to us when my aunt passed away. Mrs. Perisi who lived in the shadow of an odor-producing refinery, actually made the same point Paul is making in 2 Corinthians 2. Even in the midst of the stink there can be places permeated with a different fragrance—the fragrance of Christ that invades the stench and somehow overcomes it.

After that last Christmas with my aunt I had not gone back to Iselin until her funeral. My aunt had a long illness and when she died it was as if everyone took a deep sigh of relief and thought, "it is finally over, the suffering is over." Mrs. Perisi was so wonderful, helpful, and loving that day, she actually brought joy, and comfort the day of my aunt's funeral. Come to think of it coming back to Iselin it didn't stink as much as it use to that day. I think when Paul said what God wanted to do through us is spread everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Him, He had something similar in mind. He probably had in mind that the next time He comes back (the 2nd Advent) to this world He created and died to redeem, it won't smell like it used to. With the power of the Spirit within us, and the Risen Christ before us, maybe, just maybe He'll be able to use us to spread Him everywhere, so that it's not just beginning to look like Christ has come, it's beginning to smell like He has come as well. "For we are to God the aroma of Christ to those who are being saved, and to those who are perishing" (v. 15).

What is God asking you to do to bring the fragrance of Christ to the world this Advent?