

Sunday, March 26, 2023
The Fifth Sunday in Lent
John 11:1-45

This morning I need to report a theft. And I'm the thief. I stole a sermon. Or rather, I found a sermon, and so I "borrowed" it to use today ... not because I'm too lazy to write my own, but because this sermon is simply too good and must be used. The sermon is entitled "Stinky George."

We called him Stinky George. He was a homeless man, unemployed, and often sick. He would occasionally show up at church. He liked the air conditioning, the pot-luck lunches, and the communion wine. On this particular Sunday, he sat down right in front of me. I scooted downwind a bit. When the children came in from Sunday School, my son passed right behind Stinky George. "Dad, something smells," he said in a loud 4-year-old's voice. "Randy," I whispered, "come sit down." "But something stinks! What is it?" he continued. "Let's just scoot down here," I whispered. "Do you smell it too?" he asked. I nodded yes. "Well, what is it, Dad?"

If I had been really honest, I would have said, "Randy, that is the smell of homelessness and poverty. That is the smell of hunger and loneliness. That is the smell of alcoholism and illness. That is the smell of one who has no place to bathe and, in many ways, no reason to bathe. Randy, that is the smell of death."

In George, the smell of death seemed more real than the fragrance of life. So most of us stayed away, afraid that the stink

would get on us. What we did not know, did not want to know or admit, is that it was already within us. George was just more honest about it. If we looked at our lives, we would have seen the reality of death. It was there in our divorces and broken relationships, in our wounds and betrayals, in our fears, in our anger and resentment, in our addictions, in our sorrow and despair, in our excessive busyness and preoccupation with success, and in things done and left undone. Death wraps around us like strips of cloth, and it stinks.

It seems that death permeates our lives and world. Like Stinky George, it is in us. It hangs like a cloud over Japan. It blows through Afghanistan, Libya, the Ivory Coast, and countless other places filled with war and violence. It wafts into our lives, taking those we love and cherish.

We want to avoid it. "Lord, if you had been here, our brother Lazarus would not have died," Martha and Mary say. But Jesus wasn't there, at least not in the way they wanted. He wasn't there for a purpose, so that they (and we) might believe. Believe what? The fragrance of life is greater than the stench of death. That is the choice before us every time we meet death, whether it is in us, in others, or in the world. Do we trust the smell of death more than the fragrance of life?

It seems that those gathered at the tomb trust the stench more than the fragrance. "Take away the stone," Jesus says. His words echo Ezekiel's prophecy that God will open our graves, bring us up from those graves, put his spirit within us, and we shall live. All

of this happens in and through Jesus, who is the resurrection and life. Martha protests. Death has filled her nostrils.

“Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days,” she says.

We, too, have said that.

“He’s beyond help.”

“It’s his own fault.”

“Leave him alone.”

“She’s always been like that.”

“She’ll never change.”

“It’s hopeless.”

“It will always be like this.”

“No matter what I do, or how hard I try, nothing happens.”

Our words may be different, but the meaning is the same. Those are words of death - words that say we trust the stench more than the fragrance.

Jesus does not deny that death stinks. It does. It always has. Instead, Jesus asks us to release the life - the fragrance - that is wrapped in death.

“Unbind him and let him go,” Jesus commands. To unbind another or let ourselves be unbound means we must trust the perfume of life more than the stink. They did that for Lazarus. With each strip of cloth they removed, death trembled, knowing its days were numbered. The unbinding of Lazarus was a death sentence for death! That sentence was carried out in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ.

Every day we smell death, and every day we have the opportunity, by the grace of God, to change and be changed, to unbind and be unbound, to let go and be let go.

I sometimes wonder what happened to Stinky George. More often, I wonder what would have happened if I had followed Jesus's words rather than my nose. What would have happened if I had invited George to lunch one day? What if I had helped George find an AA meeting and the social services that could have provided medical care, a place to live, and food to eat? What if I had said, "George, tell me the stories you are always telling but that I have never listened to. I want to know you and your life." What if, when it came time to exchange the peace, I put my arms around Stinky George, pulled him close and said, "The peace of Christ be with you."

I wonder what I would have unbound in George. I wonder what George would have unbound in me. Amen

In Lent, may we be increasingly concerned with speaking words of comfort, strength, consolation and encouragement, and not words that demean, sadden, anger or show scorn.

St. Francis