

Heaven scent: John 12:1-8

by [Beth Sanders](#) in the [March 6, 2007](#) issue

What does God's love smell like? Like honeysuckle on a warm spring day? Like a salty ocean breeze? Can God's love also smell like a person who hasn't bathed for days? For the people in the story in John 12, God's love smells like their brother Lazarus, who has just been raised after four days in a tomb. Now his friends and loved ones are sharing a dinner in celebration and thanking Jesus, who has come out of hiding to see his friend Lazarus enjoying his new life.

How do they feel that night as they gather in Lazarus's home at Bethany for dinner? Perhaps Lazarus is reclining at the table, recounting what it was like being dead and how blinding the light was as he stumbled out of the tomb. He has bathed, of course, but there is still a faint scent of myrrh about him, still a few twigs of cloves stuck in his hair. The smells of freshly baked bread and of the fattened calf roasting reach the guests, and soon they're at the table. Then, while everyone is eating and talking, Mary comes in quietly, carrying her best bottle of fragrant oil. She walks over to Jesus and without a word kneels, uncorks the bottle and pours all of the oil over his feet. Jesus closes his eyes and lets the cool oil soothe his dusty, calloused, aching feet. Soon the others are sniffing the air, wondering what strong, sweet smell is cutting through the aroma of beef and wine. The smell of death has been with these friends, but Mary shows us that God's persistent love smells even stronger, and that it will triumph in the defeat of Jesus' death.

When I was an associate pastor in a large church in Atlanta, part of my responsibility was to tend people who came off the street seeking balm for the outward signs of their poverty. One afternoon I met with a man who seemed to have gone many days without bathing. I spent at least 30 minutes counseling him in a small office. When I came out, others nearby asked how I could breathe in his presence. In addition to having doubts about tolerating the smell, some might consider it wasteful to spend time listening to the man's paranoid rants. But the old Brylcreem ad that "a little dab'll do ya" has never been in God's plan when it comes to the generosity of spirit that we are to show to those who need us.

Judas gets a good whiff of Mary's perfume and remarks, "Isn't it better for that precious bottle of perfume to benefit more than just one person?" Surely Jesus, who always taught the disciples about caring for the poor and downtrodden, will see it Judas's way. But Jesus wants us to see Mary's confidence in the boundless capacity of God's love. He knows that piecemeal acts of charity will not dissipate the aroma of poverty—spiritual, emotional, physical and economic—that clings to us.

In Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, widower Atticus Finch raises his young son and daughter amid the racism and classism of Depression-era Alabama. Jem and Scout face the taunting of neighbors and school peers when Atticus agrees to defend a black man accused of raping a white woman. Mrs. Dubose, an elderly neighbor, sits on her front porch and torments the children with comments as they walk home from school. One day Jem takes his revenge by grabbing a baton and bashing all of Mrs. Dubose's prized camellia bushes. Atticus punishes the children by having them go to her home and read aloud to her for two hours every afternoon for a month. Scout remembers, "An oppressive odor met us when we crossed the threshold, an odor I had met many times in rain-rotted gray houses. . . . It always made me afraid, expectant, watchful."

Each afternoon, they read while Mrs. Dubose sleeps and drools until an alarm clock rings, and then the children run outside to breathe fresh air. Finally the month is up, and not long afterward, Mrs. Dubose dies. The children are surprised when Atticus tells them that she was addicted to morphine, and that their reading sessions helped her to wean herself so she could die in freedom. He says, "I wanted you to see what real courage is. . . . It's when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do."

Mary pours out her whole bottle of perfume without regret because she knows it is only a trifle compared to the magnitude of God's love that she sees in the Messiah before her. Mary knows that Lazarus will die again, and she knows that Jesus will die, but she believes with even greater passion that Jesus can bring victory over death. Though she anoints him for burial, she also wipes the oil away, because it will not be necessary to cover up the smell of death. While Martha had said, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days," Mary smells things differently around Jesus. She smells the fragrance of new life, and her joy over it releases that sweet smell to fill the house, the church and the world with the abundant fragrance of Christ's love.

In this moment between the stench of Lazarus's four days in the tomb and the spicy scent of myrrh and aloes with which Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus will embalm Jesus' body, the sweet aroma of God's love is wafting in the air. It sticks in Mary's hair as she brushes it against Jesus' feet and fills the house wherever she goes. Has anyone caught a whiff of God's love on us 21st-century Christians lately?