

# The aroma of Christ (2 Corinthians 2:1-16)

## Paul is very interested in the sense of scent.

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In the New Testament, Jesus' presence among people is often described in sensory terms. Jesus *appears*. He invites his disciples to *touch* his wounded body after being raised. Mary hears Jesus *call* her name outside the tomb. At the Last Supper, Jesus invites those gathered to "Take and *eat*" and then "take and *drink*."

Then there's the sense of scent. In 2 Corinthians 2, Paul draws the reader into the "aroma of Christ" and twice uses the word *fragrance*: "fragrance from death to death" and "fragrance from life to life." "Aroma of Christ" seems to refer to the followers of Jesus; the double sense of "fragrance" seems to refer to those who received the gospel's message and embodiment of forgiveness and reconciliation and those who did not.

I once received an email invitation to a party. The event would be peanut-free and fragrance-free. This was a hospitable move, creating space for all people to be present in ways that are authentic, without fear of illness or judgment.

What would it mean to live out and proclaim the gospel message among our neighbors in ways that create space for people to be authentic and without fear? How could our language and presence be contextually hospitable to those whom we encounter? In what ways could our message reach beyond our cultural idioms? How could our conversations make room for us to hear and learn from one another about our experiences of new life? What stories will we tell? Where will that road take us? Who will we be when we walk alongside one another? How will Jesus show up among us? What new sights will we see? What new scents will our noses open us to? What does new life smell like?

I suspect there's not one answer to these questions but many. Wherever they lead, we are opened to something new. Will we welcome what we cannot yet see, taste, touch, hear, and smell? Or will we hide behind aromas and fragrances of our own making? Which scents lead us on a new path, and which send us running around in circles? At what point do we confess our fear? When will we follow where our scents lead us?

A long while ago, a professor of mine said that when he walked into a seminary, he'd stop, close his eyes, and breathe deeply. He claimed he could smell whether the gospel had been proclaimed in that space or not. I was caught under the spell. I believed this was possible. Before I'd preach in a congregation, I'd rummage around in the sanctuary. I'd close my eyes and inhale deeply. After a while, I realized I'd never heard the professor describe the scent of the gospel. He never passed out samples of it in class.

Later, as I broke edges off a loaf of bread and placed them in the hands of those who came to the table, as I poured wine in plastic cups, as I declared "the body of Christ given for you" and "the blood of Christ shed for you," I caught a whiff of what I knew the gospel smelled like. As I gave a blessing to the children who tagged along to the table and made the sign of the cross on their foreheads, I knew not only the scent but the fragrance the gospel left with each person. It was nothing less than love itself.