



Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
6 September 2026

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Author Rita Snowden tells the story of sitting down in a café to have tea in a small village near Dover, England. As she sat at her table on the sidewalk, she kept catching a scent she could not place. She noticed as people walked by her on the street, the scent would become stronger. Stopping the waiter she asked about the smell – a flower garden? She questioned. “No.” The waiter said. A perfume factory. Every person, leaving the factory, carried the scent of the perfume with them all the way home. What an incredible, albeit somewhat unwilling or unintentional, witness to the beauty of the world. You have to wonder, if the people living in the village ever stopped to smell the perfume carried on the wind by jacket and pant leg? Or if they had grown so accustomed to the smell of the perfume that they never even noticed the pleasant scent on the wind.

Now place that story alongside the story of our friend Lazarus. You know the one. The brother of Mary and Martha. Friend of Jesus. The one who gets sick. So sick that the sisters send word to Jesus, “Lord, the one whom your love is ill.” And when Jesus hears the message, he is so concerned, he waits almost four full days to go to Bethany. And in that time, Mary and Martha, watch their brother get weaker and weaker until finally, Lazarus dies. And in their grief, Mary and Martha do what is required – expected. They wash their brother’s body and then they prepare him for burial. Bands of linen wrapped around him again and again. Spices of myrrh and aloe were applied and for a time the smell of death was covered by the perfume of the Myrrh and aloe. But the perfume would only cover so much and soon the smell of death would overwhelm everything else. And when Jesus finally arrives – when Martha and Mary both accuse their savior of taking too long to come to their brother – Jesus simply asks to be taken to the place where Lazarus is buried. By this time, the rock that seals the grave has long been in place and the smell of death held at bay. Until Jesus tells them to take the stone away. Martha, knowing how terrible the smell of death would be, reminds Jesus that there is already a stench since her brother had been dead four days. But Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?”⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And the smell overwhelms them. It turns their stomachs so much so that they cover their faces to provide some protection from the smell that gives witness to the power of death.

Why these stories? Perfume and the smell of death. Unintentional witnesses to the beauty of life and the power of death. Earlier this week, I began to wonder how I might tell these stories and connect them to the teaching Jesus shares with us today. ¹⁵ “If your brother or sister sins against you, ^[h] go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. ¹⁶ But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector.” I wonder, if you had to name it, what might sin smell like to you? Something burning. Something rotten.

Does sin, smell like death, when it reaches the throne room of heaven?

And in the same breath, what does forgiveness smell like – the lilac blossom, the vine of honeysuckle, the blossom on an orange tree, baby powder, freshly baked cookies?

On Easter Sunday, in this place, the smell of resurrection is stronger than on any other day. Easter lilies fill the space. People complain. I can only offer you Benadryl. But the Easter Lily is the unintentional star witness of the day. The joy of Easter is about overwhelming every one of the five senses in worship. Your sight should be filled with the beauty of fabrics of white and gold that announce glory, your hearing should be deafened by the sounds of brass instruments, organ, guitar, drums, and voices raised in praise, your sense of touch should be flooded with handshakes, hugs, and wiping of tears of joy, your sense of taste should be stunned by the texture of the bread and the sweetness of the wine, and your sense of smell should be stopped at the doors of the sanctuary as the resurrection is announced with the scent of every blossoming lily that



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overpowers even the strongest cologne of your neighbor. The power of smell should not be underestimated in the witness to the power of God.

If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. In other words, an enemy. In old testament days, such sinners would not have been kicked out of the community – they would have been stoned to death. By the time Jesus shares these words, he has already preached his sermon on the mount. And one of the most difficult things Jesus shares with his listeners arrives in Matthew 5:44, “but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” And now, a short time later, Jesus is offering a new way to walk with those who sin against you – your enemy. And even more surprising to me is this revelation. For the first time I came to understand that right before this teaching of Jesus about dealing with someone who sins against you, Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep

If a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴ So it is not the will of your ^[g] Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

So right before Jesus instructs the disciples to point out the fault and regain the one who listens – literally loving your enemy. Jesus tells the story of leaving the 99 to find the one because it is the will of your Father in heaven that not even one should be lost. And then Jesus finishes this teaching on sinfulness and forgiveness/restoration/resurrection even, with these words. “Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

The idea being that if two or three members of the community can bring even one lost sinner back into the community, Jesus promises to be there. We get caught in trying to use this one verse to confirm that Jesus is present where two or three are gathered anytime, anywhere, for any reason. When, the verse is specific to the restoration of one lost who has been found and brought back to the worshipping community by two or three with the presence of Jesus. Does it matter – the specifics of this one verse? My God, in earlier days of ministry, I thought it did. Now, I wonder – of the meaning behind the promise is what really carries the importance of the promise Jesus makes.

Of course, Jesus is present with two or three, with fifty and sixty, with one hundred and two hundred, and also with the one – all alone. But never truly alone.

That is the whole point, after all – that we are never alone.

Even in our sinfulness, our broken relationships,

our lost causes, our doubting faithfulness,

our feelings of unworthiness, our complete and utter hopelessness,

our absolute inability to surrender to the One who calls us by name – Jesus is still there.

That is the promise.

That even when we sin and fall short of the glory of God, Jesus is still there.

In the perfume caught on the sweater of the factory worker passing by. Jesus is still there.



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At the entrance to the grave as the stone is rolled away. Jesus is still there.

In the blossom of the Easter lily announcing resurrection. Jesus is still there.

In the fragrance of forgiveness that lifts our eyes to the hills and then higher to the throne room of heaven. Jesus is still there.

“Where two or three are gathered in my name,” says Jesus, “I am there.”

Thanks be to God! Amen.