



First United Methodist Church - Moweaqua, Illinois

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Scent of Death

John 12:1-11, 16-33

There was no getting around it...no nice way to put it... Ron Reynolds was one of the oddest ducks that I ever knew.... and believe me Kevin and I have made the acquaintance of some pretty strange characters . For example Ron purchased a home and 40 acres for \$5000 back in 1971. Of course the house didn't have any plumbing but that didn't bother Ron. When his wife and 7 children complained about having to climb over a 7 foot snow drift in order to use the outhouse on cold Wisconsin mornings.. .compassionate sensitive Ron took a wicker chair busted the bottom out of it and parked it over a 5 gallon pail. And when his wife complained about the plaster that was falling down off the walls.. old Ron didn't tell her to hush up. No. Instead he went out and bought him a pickup truck full of paneling.... and then he proceeded to panel over the walls, the ceilings and the windows. Nope I'll never forget how old Ron used to brag about having his house paid for...he didn't owe a dime to anyone on anything he owned. But all the while we lived there we never met anyone who envied him the least little bit.

And if you think Ron was a mite strange you should have met his brother Donald. Donald was so bad Ron told stories about him. Donald used to spend all his time in the bar while his wife waited outside in the car. One day Mrs. Donald complained that it was Christmas Eve and they didn't have a Christmas tree yet. So Donald went home, got his axe, went to the State Park and liberated a tree. When he brought the tree home he found out it was too tall for the ceiling... so Donald took the shotgun blasted a hole in the floor, put the tree in it said "Merry Christmas" and drove downtown to resume his usual position on his favorite barstool at Talles Tavern.

Well Ronald and Donald were an unforgettable pair, and so when the phone rang one hot August day... I was shocked to hear Ron's wife Brenda on the phone, I had not talked to her in years, I could not even imagine how she got my phone number ...but it was Deju Vu all over again. "Sharon" she said "Ron is dead. He went fishing last week, and he never came home and today they found his body along side the river... he was lying dead near the river for a least a week. Do you suppose you could come back and do the funeral?" Ron was never one for formality (there's an understatement) she told me that there wasn't going to be a visitation or anything, they just wanted a real short service before the burial. Seeing that we were going to be in the area for a family occasion anyway, I agreed to do it.

A few days later arrived for the funeral home and immediately began to notice some peculiar odors. The first thing I identified was the smell of Vicks, apparently everyone in the area had a cold because everyone seemed to have Vicks under their nose. But there was another scent in the air as well...something bad smelling... like something had died.... It was then I realized that that smell was coming from the coffin...apparently, the August heat had a certain effect on Ron's body and even though the funeral director had used a special body bag and coffin... once you got within 20 feet you could smell things were getting a

little ripe.. To quote John 11:39 King James version "He stinketh"

My stomach turned several times as I stood next to the coffin during the funeral service. And I thought I would lose lunch for sure when we got into the hearse and was informed the air conditioning had quit working. It was 95 degrees and Ron was to be buried in a country cemetery... It was a long drive on a gravel road and every time we went over a bump we were reminded of Ron's presence. Finally the funeral director lit up a cigarette and for the first time in my life I thanked someone for smoking. You know the strange thing about that experience was... that it took 3 full days before my nose cleared of the scent of death.

Throughout the 12th chapter of John there is also a heavy smell of death. Everything that happens points toward the impending end. It begins with the anointing of Jesus at Bethany, a beautiful description of love and adoration that took place within the circle of Christ's close friends. The anointing was more than a kind act... Set within its context, one week before the crucifixion of Jesus, those who are familiar with Jewish burial customs, have no trouble seeing that John wants us to know that this anointing was actually a prophetic action. In effect Mary was performing a last rite, preparing the body of Jesus for burial. A few verses later John ends that incident by revealing that plans were being made to kill both Jesus and Lazarus. John follows this account with the story of Palm Sunday, which concludes with the increasing anger of the Pharisees. Verse 19 reads: "See this is getting us no where. Look how the whole world is going after him!"

Next, John relates an encounter between Jesus and Andrew and Phillip. The two disciples were looking for Jesus in order to let him know that some Greeks wanted to see him. This request triggered in Jesus a foreknowledge of his impending death. The hour had come for him to be glorified by his willing sacrifice. He would be exalted by being lifted up to die on a cross and in so doing he would draw all people unto himself. Here in verses 24-33 we once again find the scent of death: "unless a kernel of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies it produces many seeds. He who loves his life will lose it"

Sooner or later in our Lenten journey with Jesus we come to the stark reality of the cross. Much to our regret, like the disciples, we cannot forever sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to his words; nor can we continue to travel in comfort with him and marvel at the unique way he touches the very heart of the deepest need of whoever comes before him. Jesus' journey on this road less traveled... is a path that leads to the hill of the skull, Golgotha where crucifixion caused men's bodies to be torn apart ... their souls were pierced by unbearable shafts of pain ... not to mention the sheer terror and naked shame of public execution. Here is the source of the smell of death.

Yet despite the fact that Jesus knew what must come, Jesus did not writhe in agony.. he did not take to his bed ... he did not hide. In fact, scholars tell us that Jesus might have lived a long healthy life if he had prudently left the politically charged area of Herod's Jerusalem and journeyed East of Galilee to the friendlier more tolerant territories of Philip the Tetrarch. Instead, Jesus accepts the very reason he came to this cross road. "Father" he cries out "glorify your name!". And a voice from Heaven confirms and affirms his choice. "I have glorified it and will glorify it again." With the scent of his own death in the air, Jesus does the only thing

an obedient son can do....he turns to his Father as if to say "I hope it is worth it. I do this for you ...use my suffering for a good purpose."

It's funny... but every year as I hear this story... as I begin to smell the scent of death, I always hope that there will be another way... that this time the story will turn out differently. But then I confess my wishfulness is just another example of foolish thinking. Because lets face it ...the death of Jesus was the only way to show humanity the unfathomable extent of God's love. His death was the ultimate example of what it means to give and what it means to forgive. It was if God was saying... stop this cycle of hate and greed, abuse and jealousy, power and domination ..see what a bad end it comes to? See where your sin leads? See what evil it causes? Human sin literally stinks of death to high heaven! .Sin... our sin...the stuff we like to indulge in so much was the very same way of living and thinking that ended up crucifying God's Son... He died for us. They lifted him up between Heaven and earth and he died the most agonizing death known to humankind. In that moment our sins--mine and yours--were picked up and laid on Christ-our sacrificial lamb. He was made sin for us. He had no sin of his own yet he became guilty of whatever it is that bothers our conscience in the wee hours of the morning. Abusing your children or spouse? Jesus was a man who never had a wife.. .but on the cross he accepted your tendencies to hurt people and then he died for this sin. Is your heart full of hate towards your neighbor or for people of another color? Jesus had a soul that was full of love for all his Father's children . . .but on the cross he bore the responsibility for your prejudice and anger and he died because of it. Are you a person who would rather lie than tell the truth? Do you like to gossip and find fault with others? Well, Jesus was a person who always told the truth ... He preferred to look for the best in people and he was gracious enough to forgive the worst.. yet when Jesus was nailed to that cross all of our lies and taunts, all of the agony brought about by our hypocrisy, mockery and gossip was heaped upon Jesus. I'm sure the cumulative weight of these sins alone caused (and still causes) him excruciating pain.

It must have broken God's heart to see his Son die such a terrible death...yet God's love for us conquered even this disgusting scene... It is the cross...the death of Jesus...that stands as a bookmark in time saying..."This is what perfection looks like...this is your example...this is what it is all about." Greatness in God's eyes is not measured by how much you earn, or how many people you control, or who can smack someone else to the ground.. .instead greatness in the Kingdom of God is measured by how much you love, by the charity and caring you show towards others, and by your ability to forgive ...even those who you rightfully call enemies..

. Sadly, although we still hold out hope, the course of human behavior was not changed forever by the words of Jesus, nor were all the ailments and sicknesses on this planet cured by his healing touch. Yet the world has been brought to a halt--sometimes turned around-by a confrontation with the awesome love of God exemplified on the cross of Christ, that instrument of death, that method of execution by which Jesus was lifted up from the earth.

The smell of death still lingers there on the hill of the skull. But in a strange way, that foul scent is overpowered by the sweet scent of triumph and victory, the assurance of hope and life, the forgiveness and

compassion of a loving Father and an obedient son. Because in the moment that Christ was lifted up to die, he became the source of life that draws me and you back into a loving relationship with God-- and the Wind of His Spirit makes fresh & clean the air between us and God once again... May we inhale deeply ...so that each breath we take renews our life to the glory of God.

Amen