

But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere.

2

Corinthians 2:14

Introduction:

So many things made my grandfather who he was. The glass of buttermilk each night before bed. The lazy boy chair in front of the TV where he would sip that buttermilk and set it on the "chair-side" table. The short and sudden snore which would wake him up and, in its volume and abruptness, would make all of us jump. But one thing stands out more than anything else.

He always smelled of Barbasol. To this day, when I smell Barbasol I am transported back to his home, his buttermilk, his chair, his snore. When I smell Barbasol I immediately think of my grandfather, J.B.

We all have perfumes and colognes that remind us of people who have been important in our lives. These aromas remind us, without any effort on our part, of those people that we love and that we knew loved us.

What is Jesus' cologne? What is it about Jesus that reminds us of his love for us and our love for him? And what is it about Jesus' work in us that works like an aroma? What is it that speaks to others, without words, and reminds others, without effort, of Jesus' way of life and draws them into recognizing and remembering his love?

Move:

One of the "after-shaves" in the religious aisle of colognes is a brand called "Success". We have all worked to figure out our purpose in life, we

have set according to that purpose, and we have set our time, energy and talents to achieve that purpose. We have seen what happens when a person who believes in God succeeds in achieving that purpose. They give all the glory to God. They witness to their success as something that God has given them. And, implicitly, they suggest that this is the the end result of all of those who have faith. The aroma of Jesus is a successful person who gives glory to God.

This is the group that Paul is up against in his second letter to the Corinthians. Twice in our letter Paul speaks (with tongue in cheek) of the "super-apostles" who have come to Corinth. Apparently they have a great resume. And they have letters of recommendation, presumably from other churches, telling of the great ministry they have done. This must include rave reviews of their preaching. They have been trained in the art of rhetoric, very important in their day, and they know how to apply it when they speak about God. As a result, the Corinthian congregations are interested in following them, emulating them, and their message. Paul had started these churches with his understanding of a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Now they were hearing something different, the aroma of success, and it smelled very attractive indeed!

Move:

Paul spends a lot of time in this letter defending himself against the ministry of the "super-apostles".

In 2 Corinthians 10:10 Paul quotes a comment from the super-apostles and their followers regarding his ministry:

His (Paul's) letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.

In chapter 11 Paul has to say it outright, "I do not think I am in the least inferior to those "super-apostles". (2 Corinthians 11:5)

Paul spends a lot of time in 2 Corinthians defending himself against the

ministry of the "super-apostles".

Move:

Paul is at a disadvantage.

The super-apostles promote themselves and, in so doing, they promote their understanding of a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. As they keep doing what they have already proven they are good at doing, they are the message they are preaching. By committing themselves to success after success they exude the aftershave of God as success.

Paul, on the other hand, is preaching a relationship with God through Jesus Christ that is in alignment with Jesus' own words on discipleship. "Whoever wants to be my disciple", Jesus said, "must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Matthew 16:24) The aroma of Christ, then, is not about the promotion of ourselves, but the denial of ourselves.

God looked at the world, as we do the headlines of the morning paper, and said, "The world is really messed up!" Unlike us, however, God did not leave it at that. Instead, because of God's consistent and amazing love for us, even when we were "stinking up the world", he took action on our behalf.

God did not look upon all of our broken relationships, all of our self-destructive habits, all of our attempts to make ourselves important at the expense of others, and say, "They aren't really so bad. Let's just forget about them." No, the God of love is also a God of justice. Responsibility needed to be taken for all of the deeds and actions that have made the world what it is today. At the same time God knew that we could not survive taking responsibility for our actions. So, he sent Jesus to take the responsibility for our actions. God's love and justice fuse on the cross. Jesus Christ denied himself in order to take on what we are responsible for. Jesus Christ took up his cross to die in our place. And in his resurrection we see that God's plan succeeded. The sacrifice of Jesus on

our behalf has fulfilled justice. The resurrection of Jesus tells us that a new way of relating to God in Jesus Christ is now available to us.

We enter into that new relationship by simply receiving the gift of Christ's death on our behalf. Our relationship with God is no longer about our actions on God's behalf but God's actions in Jesus Christ on our behalf. Once we have entered this new relationship with God through faith in Christ we begin a process of giving up our own plans for personal success in giving our entire lives over to God. God, not our success, has become the source of our purpose, of our identity, of our security.

Paul, then, cannot promote himself in seeking to bring the Corinthians back to his view of our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. His gospel is not about his success at all. It is about God working in his life, at times in spite of who he is and what he has done.

Paul is at a disadvantage.

Move:

Paul comes up with a brilliant plan for promoting his brand of cologne against "Success". He commends God's work through his weakness and his struggles.

...as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as imposters; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

2 Corinthians

6:4-10

This is the aroma of Christ.

Paul comes up with a brilliant plan for promoting his understanding of the relationship we have with God in Jesus Christ; by commending God's work through his weakness and struggle.

Move:

The pleasing aroma of Christ contrasts with our culture as well. It isn't only in Paul's day that Paul's view of our relationship with God through Jesus Christ must compete with ideologies of success.

Most of us agree that good parenting includes instilling a sense of importance in our children, even encouraging them to believe that they are destined for great things. In our country, we have sought to establish the freedom of our citizenry with a code of law developed out of our country's national version of the 10 commandments; the constitution. Globally we have sought to establish the security and dignity of all human beings with a declaration of human rights.

A sense of destiny, of freedom and of security and dignity are important for us as human beings. But Paul's portrayal of our relationship with God through Jesus Christ offers us a different way of finding these things. A real sense of meaning and purpose in our lives does not come from proper socialization. It doesn't take us long to learn that the world doesn't have the same conviction of our importance as we do. Our freedom is not secured through letter written on paper and empowered through human consensus. We soon learn that under a government which asserts our freedom we are still captive to systems and structures in our society as well as confusions and wounds in our minds and hearts. And the security and dignity of every human being does not become reality because a group embed with a certain level of power declares it to be true. Many people in the world are still used and abused by others who are seeking to establish their own sense of destiny and success.

Paul says that we can find all of these things in a relationship with God

through Jesus Christ.

The pleasing aroma of Christ contrasts with our culture as well.

Move:

Paul draws a portrait of Christ and his followers that helps us to appreciate the aroma of Christ.

But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere.

2

Corinthians 2:14

This image is drawn from a scene more common in Paul's day than in ours. We must imagine a city defending itself from attack. The city's military is fighting against a foreign army who are seeking to take control of the town (and thus of the citizen's lives). The city's army has been defeated. The military leader of the invading army has tied the prisoners of war to the back of a cart. He is now guiding that cart through the city center as a sign to the citizens of that city that everything has changed. The old structures and powers that made their lives what it was have been defeated. A new order of life is breaking in. This is the background of Paul's portrait of Christ and his disciples.

For many of us this backdrop is unnerving; even offensive. Why would Paul associate Christ with a picture of the assertion of human power resulting in the humiliation of others? He does so to contrast his gospel with such an assertion of power. To understand this we have to look more closely at his portrait.

First, notice how he paints the military leader of the invading army. You can recognize him by the crown of thorns upon his head. He is the one who is driving the cart. Look at his hands as they hold the reigns. If you look closely you will notice holes in his hands. Look at his feet on the brake of the cart. If you look closely you will notice similar holes in his

feet. These scars come from his death on the cross on our behalf. And if you look closely at his side you will notice a scar. That was the way a Roman guard checked to make sure he was dead. The military leaders of the invading army is Jesus Christ. He won his victory, not by asserting power over others, but by letting the powers assert themselves over him to their fullest extent. In his death and resurrection on our behalf he defeated the powers that have held us captive and have made our world what it is. And so Paul begins his description with "But thanks be to God..."

Now notice the prisoners of war. They are being led by Christ. And Paul paints his own face in that line of captives. Not only that, but he includes all disciples of Christ in that number. "But thanks be to God who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphant procession..." We have been fighting on the side of the powers that make our world violent, selfish and evil. In our pursuit of our own success we have had to learn to play according to the rules of these powers. But Christ has defeated these powers and in Christ we are no longer captive to these powers. Now we are captive to Christ. And it is in our captivity to Christ that we find our sense of destiny (who always leads us). In Christ we find our freedom, not to do "anything we want to do"...we are never free to do that anyway, but the freedom to do good, the freedom to be good, the freedom to be like Jesus. In Christ we find our security and dignity, not by struggling to take our life from success to success to establish a sense of well-being, but by the love of God that has brought us into the relationship with God almost in spite of ourselves and which is constant and sure.

It is when our destiny, our freedom, and our security and dignity are found in being led as captives in Christ's triumphant procession that we become the aroma of Christ.

Move:

This aroma is counter-intuitive for us. It is something we need to let settle in our minds and hearts.

In 2 Corinthians 1:8–9,10b Paul says: "We do not want you to be informed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead....On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us..."

Can you detect the aroma of Christ in Paul's interpretation of his experience in Asia? That is the aroma of Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 4:10–11 Paul writes, "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body."

Can you detect the aroma of Christ in Paul's understanding of God's work in his life as he walks with him through the challenges of life? This is the aroma of Christ.

Now picture the Lord's Supper. The bread on the table represents Christ's body. "This is my body, broken for you." Jesus said. "Do this in remembrance of me." The cup on the table represents Christ's blood. "This is the cup of the new covenant," Jesus said. "Sealed in my blood for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of me."

This is the aroma of Jesus. Without words and without effort, the broken bread and the cup poured bring to us the memory of Jesus. This aroma reminds us of his love for us and our love for him.

All who trust in Christ,
all who are willing to be led,
as captives in Christ's triumphant procession,
are invited to come and to partake of the aroma of Christ.

Come.

