

Rev. Dr. Bill Smutz
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
"What About the Smell?"
Sunday, August 22, 2021

John 11:32-44

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So, the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

This month, we have been receiving the sermon in the form of a story. And when I share the sermon as a story, I always like to visit my fictional little town of Perseverance, Missouri, which exists in my mind, just a stone's throw east of Kirksville and somewhere north and west of Hannibal. Perseverance Presbyterian Church is the largest congregation in this town of 12,000 Souls or so and is where I imagine myself to be the pastor. Our story begins on a unique summer Thursday. Thursday has been one of those rare mid-August days that can creep up on you here in Perseverance and just blow your socks off. It was, of course, preceded by two weeks of blast furnace-like heat and humidity, the kind that only the Midwest can produce. Heat that makes you feel like an egg frying in a skillet and humidity that causes sweat to flow out of pores that you didn't even know you have.

The heatwave had just reached the point where the people you would pass on the square would plod on by you, zombie-like, staring into the distance, mumbling giggly about the joys of January. The heat had crossed into the danger zone of human discomfort limits where people begin to turn on each other at the slightest provocation. The heat was making human interaction ugly and unpredictable when a big, unexpected thunderstorm blew through on Wednesday evening. The farmers were happy. "Rain makes grain in August," they say. But the heat was forecast to stick around despite the rain and the rest of us knew that all that new moisture from the rain would just make things even more humid in the days ahead when the sun and the heat returned. And so, it was a welcome surprise when Thursday morning dawned at 59 degrees with blue skies and a sweet northwest breeze. The humidity had seemed to take the day off. People smiled on Thursday and talked to each other on Thursday and walked with a bounce in their step on Thursday. And they went to bed that night with a window in the bedroom open so that the cool, fresh air could guide their dreams clear till dawn.

But those dreams were all too quickly interrupted by a screaming siren calling the volunteer firefighters to duty. The siren erupted at precisely 11:43 p.m., three weeks ago now. And everything, absolutely everything has been an overwhelming whirlwind ever since then. By 11:51 p.m. on the night of the fire, I had had three calls from firefighter members of my congregation letting me know that they were headed to the Methodist Church, which they had been told was fully engulfed in flames. Little Memorial Methodist Church was a gem of ecclesiastical architecture having been designed by some young hotshot architect from Kansas City in the Richardsonian romance style, which was so popular at the time. Built in 1891 by the owner of the Perseverance Glove Factory, Richard Lamont, the church was given in memory of his younger sister, Edith, who had died of pneumonia two years earlier just after turning 25. A January blizzard had dumped a lot of drifting snow, and Edith had been trying to shovel a pathway down the lane to the country road so that she could go fetch the doctor because her mother had grown ill. But the lane was long and the snow was deep and all the exertion made Edith hot until the cold air gave her a chill. And then she was just gone. So fast, too young. Richard Lamont was heartbroken and needed to do something tangible to hang on to his sister's memory. When he came up with the idea of a memorial church, Lamont in his grief, spared no expense. The massive stones that made up the church's foundation had been shipped all the way from New England. The shingle siding came from British Columbia, the roof slates from Pennsylvania. The stained glass windows were created and installed by an artist from Chicago. And the chancel furniture, pulpit, communion table, and baptismal font were made and covered with beautiful mosaic designs by the Tiffany Studios of New York City.

Though Memorial's glory had faded a bit over the years, the little building was still pretty well known in architectural circles. And every so often architects would come to town with a sketch pad or a camera and spend some time at the church. In those times when I needed to ponder and pray over some particularly thorny issue in my life, whether that was my home life or my church life-- in those times, I would use the key that Memorial's longtime pastor, Chris [Momani?], had given me many years before. And I would let myself in and go sit in that beautiful place and in the quiet, contemplate, what was troubling me, what I might need to do. Chris was the last full-time pastor to serve Memorial. When he retired and went back home to Michigan, the Methodist bishop realized that the congregation had grown so small that it could no longer afford a pastor. So the bishop started filling the pulpit with seminary students. They attended classes Monday through Thursday at their seminary in Dubuque or Kansas City or St. Louis. And they would come and care for the congregation and lead worship Friday through Sunday. Until the Methodist Conference meeting this past June, Janice Gordon was the most recent seminarian to watch over Memorial. But after graduation, the bishop placed her at a more viable church down in Hannibal, and the memorial folks had been getting by on pulpit supply. Over the two years that she had served Memorial, I would have a cup of coffee with Janice from time to time. I wanted to see how ministry was going for her. And I also wanted to hear what seminarians were thinking about the current state of the church. For the nature of the church has been changing so fast in recent years that when you've been out in the field for a while like me, it's easy to lose touch with current thinking. It's easy to grow distanced from best practices. Friday dawned as cold and beautiful as Thursday had been except that the odor of charred wood hung heavy in the air. The fire had pretty much consumed the church by 1:00 AM which is when the steeple collapsed. And the little bell that had called folks to worship for over 100 years peeled sweetly one last time as it hit the ground. All of us who had gathered to watch the fire, Methodist or not, all of us worked quietly as that sound floated away. The volunteer firefighters ended up staying the entire night pouring water on hot spots.

At 8:00 AM the next morning, on the nose, my phone rang. It was Kurt Holly, president of the board of Memorial Methodist, wondering if the board could come have a noontime emergency meeting at Perseverance Presbyterian. He also asked if I would join them at the meeting since both the district superintendent and the bishop were traveling and unavailable. The meeting commenced right at noon, and after a tender opening prayer, President Holly turned to me and asked if we decent and orderly Presbyterians would allow a bunch of warm-hearted Methodists to hold Sunday worship in our chapel while they figured out what they were going to do. I immediately agreed, and we created a schedule that worked for both congregations. Next, Kurt stated the obvious, that the church was a total loss. And he asked his fellow board members what they thought

should be done. Without exception, the other five members of the board began talking about rebuilding. They knew they had insurance. And while it might not be able-- they might not be able to recreate Memorial Methodist exactly as Richard Lamont had built it with that insurance money, they were determined to come as close as possible. Cheryl Martin was charged with contacting Danny Harris, the MFA insurance agent in Perseverance, to get details on the settlement amount the memorial board could expect so they could begin to plan what rebuilding could look like. Our first shared Sunday morning went well, but then I didn't hear anything more about the Methodist situation until the following Wednesday morning. I was working on the sermon in my office when Beulah Sheridan burst in demanding that we do something. You've probably heard me speak about Beulah before. She is something of a force of nature in the church who believes that her opinion is always first among equals and should be followed as soon as it is uttered. This day, Beulah's opinion and expectation was that we presbyterian's should immediately do something to help our suffering Methodist sisters and brothers. I started to open my mouth and tell her what we were already doing, but Beulah was on a roll, and I thought it best not to interrupt her. She had just come from visiting her cousin Hortense, whom she had run into at Browns Grocery, where they were each picking up a few things for their respective noon meal. Hortense told Beulah that the Memorial Methodist members had learned the night before there wasn't enough insurance money to rebuild the church.

Apparently, the church had quit carrying replacement coverage nearly 30 years before when money got tight, and then no one thought to check on the coverage in all the years since, even as the potential replacement cost grew and grew. When the insurance agent, Danny, told the church board how poor their settlement was going to be, they quickly figured out that all they could afford for their new church was a Quonset hut with a plastic steeple on top. Beulah, always rather plain-spoken, told me that Hortense had told her that the news of their reduced state had rippled through the mess at Methodist folks like a fart in church and that they were beside themselves and they didn't know what to do.

"We have to do something, Pastor," Beulah exclaimed. "We have to do something. They are our brothers and sisters." When she paused for a breath, I was finally able to get in a word edgewise and told Beulah about my conversations with Janice, the last student pastor at Memorial Methodist. Janice shared with me how she had spent her final months at the church loudly questioning the wisdom of a church having a building in this day and age. She said that not having a building would allow the congregation to be more nimble and to use their money more wisely. Both qualities, she believed, must be embraced by churches if they want a future.

"I know our Methodist friends were not expecting to have to stare into a churchless future quite so soon," I told Beulah. "But now that they have been freed from the weighty history of that building, the Memorial folks can explore new ways to be Jesus' Church today." Beulah was looking at me very skeptical, but it was my turn to be on a roll, and so I just kept going. "It's like the raising of Lazarus in John's gospel," I continued knowing that Beulah always liked a good argument from scripture. Lazarus' raising was unexpected, overwhelming, unanticipated newness, which creates space and opportunity among Jesus' disciples for additional newness.

I asked Beulah if she remembered what Lazarus sister Martha was so afraid of that she had tried to stop Jesus from raising him. With a smile on her face, Beulah said that Martha was afraid that Lazarus would smell after four days in the tomb and that her fear almost prevents the newness of Jesus from happening. "That's right," I exclaimed back to her. "But in the end, the disciples trust that Jesus will take care of them more than they fear the smell." "So maybe we should trust Jesus too," exclaimed Beulah. And with that, she turned around and marched out of my office as forcefully as she had marched in.

I don't know exactly what happened next, but Hortense and Beulah got people talking. And a couple of days later, the Memorial Methodist board was once again sitting in my office asking if they can nest within the walls of Perseverance Presbyterian for as long as it takes them to consider their new future. Obviously, I had to get the session, my governing board,

to agree to this unorthodox arrangement. And wisely, we asked the Methodist bishop and our presbytery for their blessing as well. But here we are, just three weeks post-fire. And last night, much to my delight, the Perseverance Presbyterian session agreed to this new arrangement unanimously without a moment of hesitation.

And then, to my shock and surprise, the session members said that we should watch and learn from our Memorial Methodist friends that maybe it was time for Perseverance Presbyterian to think about its own approach to ministry and mission and how best to follow Jesus in this new day and age. As the conversation continued, it became clear that none of us on session has a clue where all this pondering will end up. But we talked about working to build new relationships with individuals and even with other churches in town, obviously starting with Memorial Methodist.

And we talked about trying to figure out how working together can help everyone in Perseverance know important things like love and human dignity, like food security, like adequate healthcare, like equal access to the legal system. There was even talk about seeing the church less as a bastion of correct theology and doctrine and more as a place that makes a loving, grace-filled difference in the lives of others following the example of Jesus. As session got nearer to the end of this unexpected and long conversation, Ray Sheridan, Beulah's husband, who chairs the church's property team, is an elder on session, Ray turned to me and with a smile on his face. He said to the group, "All these changes may smell a bit, Pastor, but we can't be afraid of that, can we?"