

May 10, 2009 2 Corinthians 2:14-17 “The Easter Parade” by Richard Boatman

¹⁴But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance that results from knowing him. ¹⁵For we are to God the aroma of Christ both among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. ¹⁶To the latter it seems like the deathly smell of doom; to the former it has the refreshing fragrance of life itself. And who is equal to such a task? ¹⁷Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. But with transparent motives, as commissioned by God, in God’s presence and in communion with Christ, so we speak.

Easter is not just one day. Taking our lilies down on the Monday after the big celebration not only deprives us of beauty, it is poor theology. We spend forty days in sober reflection, repentance and sacrifice during Lent; we relive the horrible arrest and crucifixion during Holy Thursday and Good Friday; we don’t know quite what to do with Saturday (other than play soccer) and then comes Easter Sunday. Congregations swell with family and members sometimes not seen since Christmas Eve. We sing familiar resurrection songs, listen to the choir, hear a message on the empty tomb and get to shout, “Christ is risen!” And then it’s over. All over America, pulpits are vacated by senior pastors the following week—the so called “down Sunday” so that some assistant can handle the meager crowd that may be too ego shattering for the lead clergy.

Something’s wrong. We spend forty days prior to Easter focused on repentance. We ought to spend at least that much time after Easter Sunday focused on resurrection. Such mediocrity in the wake of our peak Sunday is a sad testimony to our lack of new creation understanding, to our lack of comprehending the incredible implication of resurrection. The empty tomb was not the climax of Jesus’ ministry. The resurrection was the beginning of all for which he came. Indeed, everything that preceded it—from the Old Testament to his three years of human service—was a prelude to The Easter Parade that began on that glorious morning and continues to this day. It is a parade, a “triumphal procession in Christ” that “through us spreads everywhere the fragrance that results from knowing him.”

In today’s passage we have a marvelous image of what began at Easter and continues on until the restoration of all things. Paul uses a familiar scene. A conquering army marches through a city in a triumphal procession. This parade of victory includes the displaying of spoils—the valuables and wealth gained from the defeated land, the triumphant army, the prisoners of war who await slavery or

execution, the priests waving the burning, aromatic incense and the commanding General.

Jesus as the General of our faith defeated the grave. Now as the “firstborn among many brothers and sisters,” he directs a living parade of new creations born from above. Peter, in his first letter, describes our place: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of the One who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (2:9). These words originally directed towards Israel have found their fulfillment in the Church. Jesus became the spiritual Israel, the Son of God’s delight, and through him we are now “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.”

The husband and father of the family singing group I traveled with for several years wore quality cologne and splashed it on liberally. Since we got ready to sing in our motor home, we were all usually in close proximity. So close, in fact, that I didn’t have to buy cologne. Just being close to him, I got plenty on me, especially when he gave me a big bear hug before heading into the church or conference center. I smelled like him because I was near him.

¹⁴*But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance that results from knowing him. Did you get that? “And through us spreads everywhere the fragrance that results from knowing him.”* You and I are the incense bearing priests. We spread the worshipful aroma of the living Christ wherever we go. If I had not been near the leader of our singing group, I could not have spread his fragrance. Our spiritual cologne or perfume ONLY comes by drawing near the resurrected Jesus.

But this fragrance of Christ is not pleasing to all. Consider again Paul’s image of a conquering general. The incense fills the air. The crowds breathe it in. For those aligned with the General, it is a beautiful and life-giving experience as the aroma is the smell of celebration and triumph. But what if you’re one of the prisoners? This same fragrance is a horrific reminder that dark days are ahead. This is what the great Apostle means: ¹⁵*For we are to God the aroma of Christ both among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.* ¹⁶*To the latter it seems like the deathly smell of doom; to the former it has the refreshing fragrance of life itself.*

Spiritual prisoners who are perishing because they refuse to leave what one translation calls the “road to ruin,” are frightened or offended or angered by this fragrance. They don’t get it. They resist yielding their will to Jesus’ Lordship and

seem not to understand the incredible love and transforming power behind the gift of Christ offered them.

Three brothers had all greatly prospered in life and were now comparing the gifts each had given to their mom on Mother's Day. The oldest one said, "I bought her a brand new home." The middle son said, "I purchased her a new Mercedes and hired a driver for her. The youngest one just shook his head and smiled. "I got Mom something she'll really like," he said. "I bought her a parrot that the church elders trained for nearly twelve months. It knows the entire Bible. All mom has to do is give the chapter and verse, and this parrot will recite it." A few days later the mother sat down and wrote her three sons. "Dear Donald," she penned to the oldest. "This house is way too large and besides, I liked the house I had." To her middle son she wrote, "Dear William, I didn't need a car as I rarely travel anymore. Besides, the driver is rude to me." But to her youngest she responded, "Dearest Bradley, you alone know what I really like and appreciate. The chicken you sent me was delicious."

Some people never seem to get it; they never seem to comprehend the gift that has been given. Jesus said, "the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). But many do get it and will continue to do so. The fragrance of the kingdom realm blankets their hearts and they receive the extraordinary gift of righteousness—right-standing-with God—offered in Christ. And it is through the window of this gift that grace rules in us.

Listen to Romans 5:21: "So that, just as sin reigned in death, so also *grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life* through Jesus Christ our Lord." Notice two quick things: **1)** Grace *touches* our lives in thousands of ways, but it only *reigns* in our lives through our right-standing-with God in Christ. **2)** The fulfillment of grace is eternal life. And get it out of your mind that this just means living forever. Eternal life speaks of the abundance of heaven's realm taking up residence in us as new creations. The New Testament is literally filled with this assertion that grace leads to transformation and ultimate restoration. It begins in our hearts, the interior life, and moves out into our market place, the exterior life. This working of God is the fragrance of the Spirit as we are formed and shaped and renewed and changed. This Holy Spirit cologne is splashed on our lives liberally as we march in The Easter Parade.

At the close of this passage, Paul is amazed that ones so frail would be used of God so greatly. "And who is equal to such a task?" he asks. How can we be used in

such a way? How can a holy Creator involve us so thoroughly in his mission to restore the world by bringing heaven's aroma to earth? It *is* remarkable. But as usual, Paul does not leave us to simply be amazed by God's grace. He offers us two qualities of those who would travel with Jesus in The Easter Parade. **First**, in verse seventeen he says, "Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit." One translation says we do not "corrupt the word of God." Another says "we do not adulterate God's word." It pushes all of us to search our motives for interacting with Scripture. Do we treat it with integrity? All are challenged, from the televangelist selling Bible imprinted porcelain to the church that spends more time picking out carpet samples than praying over its mission. Are we peddling mediocrity or proclaiming a message?

The first quality of traveling in Christ's Easter Parade involves integrity of our hearts. The **second** quality involves the source of our power. Verse seventeen concludes: "But with transparent motives, as commissioned by God, in God's presence and in communion with Christ, so we speak." We watched the young man we mentored graduate from seminary recently. Many times I've told him, "If you don't have something you have to share, the people shouldn't have to listen to it." It is my way of saying the power of proclaiming Christ comes from time spent with him. As we commune with our Lord, our soul becomes saturated with his presence. Our words or actions are filled with his fragrance because they are not just our own. Listen again to Paul: 1) But with transparent motives, 2) as commissioned by God, 3) in God's presence and in communion with Christ, 4) so we speak.

There is no substitute for time spent with the Lord. It acts as a sweet aroma to God from us, and it fills our lives with the fragrance of the Spirit's presence. The city of Jerusalem was called the Holy City because the Ark of God's Covenant presence was there. We as new creations in Christ now parade through the market places of this world exuding the fragrance of God's presence in our lives. The Holy City speaks of the Holy presence that makes its abode in us and of the ongoing Easter Parade in which we march.

What makes the temptation of power so seemingly irresistible? Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life. Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" We ask, "Can we sit at your right hand and your left hand in your Kingdom?"

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