

“Fragrant Offerings”

LWML Sunday

Ephesians 5:1-9

I once heard a friend make the intriguing point that *“cooking for another is a sacrificial gift of love and devotion.”* I was intrigued enough to listen. He was speaking especially of those moments when our spouses or friends or family members cook or bake for a spouse, family member, or friend. Granted, family members often feel obligated to cook or bake for other family members. Yet, regardless of our motivations and intentions, there still seems to be truth in this statement: *cooking for another is a sacrificial gift of love and devotion.* So perhaps we should make sure we take some time to tell those who give these kinds of sacrificial gifts to us on a regular basis that we thank God for them.

Now you could probably make a similar point about other activities, but we are going to stick to cooking and baking for our purposes this morning. This friend of mine suggested that when a person puts great time and effort into making baked goods or a home-cooked meal for another, they are giving of themselves. They are sacrificing time, money, and other resources to create something for another. When a person eats what was made, they are, in a very real way, partaking in something that is a part of the cook and baker. They are receiving a gift that is the product of their great thought and care. They are consuming a gift that was even made with the cook or baker’s own hands. Indeed, *cooking or baking for another is a sacrificial gift of love and devotion.*

There is another aspect of good cooking and baking that we ought to consider this morning. That is the smell, the aroma, the fragrance! Good cooking and baking for another that demands our thought, time, and money is a sacrificial gift that produces a pleasing aroma that fills the kitchen. It wafts through the whole house. We breathe in this pleasing aroma and it has the power to evoke all sorts of emotions. We feel warm and beloved. Our mood can change suddenly. The right aroma and fragrance can almost transfix us, can’t it? We come home frustrated and upset about an event that day and then we smell what’s cooking and our problems can almost just fall to the side. The smell of good comfort food even has the ability to transport us to our childhood dining tables and kitchens. Indeed, *the aroma of a good home-cooked meal is a sacrificial gift of love and devotion that has power.*

The Apostle Paul has something to tell us this morning about sacrificial gifts of love and devotion. He is not speaking primarily of our gifts to one another, though. He is speaking to the Ephesians about God’s sacrificial gift of love and devotion for us. He refers to the offering of the Lamb of God to atone for the sins of the whole world on the altar of a wooden cross as the ultimate divine act of love and devotion—*“a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God”* (Ephesians 5:2).

At the point that we are considering this morning in Paul’s letter he wants to exhort the Ephesian Christians and encourage them to live as the free, believing, baptized people of God that they are. He wants them to offer their whole lives as sacrificial gifts of love and devotion in service to one another. He wants to exhort them to *“be imitators of God, as beloved children”* and *“to walk in love”* and *“to walk as children of light.”*

But Paul knows the human condition. Paul knows that forgiven Christians still struggle in Sin. Paul knows that, given the chance, even the children of God would rather offer self-serving acts of love and devotion. They are acts of love and devotion that are pointed inward. They are about self-pleasure, self-interest, and self-promotion above all else. Paul even gives names to some of these self-centered acts of love and devotion: filthiness and foolish talk, crude joking, sexual immorality, covetousness, vain and empty talk. And even if you cannot recognize these kinds of self-serving, self-centered, self-promoting acts of love and devotion by their actions, you can recognize them by their smell, aroma, and fragrance. They stink. The unpleasant aroma of self-centered acts of love and devotion make us feel uneasy and uncomfortable. Yes, even we as the children of God may offer self-centered, selfish, self-pleasing, self-interested acts under the disguise and mask of selfless, godly, sacrificial acts of love and devotion. But who are we trying to fool?

The Apostle Paul knows the struggle for Christians then and the struggle for us as Christians now to “be imitators of God,” to “walk in love,” and to “walk as children of the light.” This is why Paul grounds his plea and appeal in the ultimate sacrificial gift of love and devotion.

Christ’s sacrifice on the cross is the only sacrificial gift of love and devotion in the history of the whole world that can present a pleasing aroma and fragrance to God to fully and finally change the mood of God toward you and your Sin. The sinless, faithful Son of God did it. The offering that Jesus made on your behalf changed the disposition of God. The aroma of the perfect sacrifice of the Lamb of God once and for all brought God, the Father to his knees. The fragrance alone satisfied his wrath and the hunger of his judgment. The sacrifice of Christ on the cross was a sacrificial act of love and devotion that we call *grace*. It is an undeserved and unearned sacrificial act of love and devotion that is credited to your account. This is why we also call it “Gospel” or “good news.”

God’s offering in Christ is then the basis on which Paul makes his appeal to the Ephesians “to be imitators of him as beloved children” and “to walk in love.” So this leaves at least one question for us that can be asked in different ways. As God’s people why then would we not want to respond with words, actions, and deeds of love? Why would we not want to respond with repentance? Why would we not endeavor always to walk as children of light? Why would we not desire and ask God to help us offer up words, actions, and deeds that are offered up to him as pleasing aromas and fragrant offerings?

I saw these fragrant offerings and pleasing aromas this past June at the LWML district convention. We had about a dozen women from our congregation helping out there. It even caught the attention of the District President of the Pacific Southwest District who came the next day with his wife for Worship here at Atonement. At this convention I heard solos at the opening service and choir offerings. I witnessed a whole congregation receiving the fragrant offering of our Lord’s Body and blood. I saw fragrant offerings being given the next morning as close to thirty young women sacrificed an hour or two of precious sleep to gather with me around the Word of God in a Bible Study.

To be sure I see a lot of these fragrant offerings and pleasing aromas generally here at Atonement, not just with the LWML. And the aroma can just about brings a person to his knees: lay initiated efforts through an after school tutoring program. A congregation of members giving a generous portion of their financial gifts and offerings as tithes on Sunday mornings. Parishioners seeking to use their talents and skills to do landscaping work and other kinds of maintenance work. Members offering their talents and abilities to serve on committees and on positions in boards. Through these individual

offerings and pleasing aromas our whole congregation becomes a pleasing aroma to our community around as we seek to carry out our mission—“to be a Christ-centered congregation that cares for the whole person with the good news of Jesus Christ.”

It is my prayer that we contribute to this pleasing aroma and add fuel to the fire with even more sacrificial acts of love and devotion flowing out of the greatest act of sacrificial love and devotion that God gave us in Christ. Let us continue to give generous, cheerful offerings of our tithes, our time, perhaps even other gifts. Let us respond with sacrifices and gifts that are a pleasing aroma to God out of response to the great sacrifice God has given for us. Amen.