

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Paul tells the Ephesians, “remove these behaviors from your lives:” “all bitterness,” all “fury,” all “anger,” all “shouting,” all “reviling,” “all malice.” He also delivers a list of virtues they need to adopt: “be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving.” If those words hit you, the good news is you’re not the first Christians who have to deal with them. The bad news is we all have to behave better.

Paul makes this request not because society will become more peaceful, or because it will bring more understanding, or because he says so. Instead, he appeals to the Ephesians based on who they are: “you were sealed,” he says. He’s referring to their baptism and possibly a ritual anointing like confirmation today. At their baptism, the Holy Spirit sealed them, branded them, tattooed them for God. Because of who they are, they should behave accordingly. You’ve probably heard this argument in other areas of your life: Because you have this last name, because you have this ancestry, because you have this job, because you wear this uniform, you have to behave differently—not acting according to what you want, but according to who you are.

Paul gives the Ephesians a model and an image. For the model, he points out, Jesus “Christ loved us and handed himself over for us.” When people disappoint us, we may get angry with them, but Christ, whose followers betrayed him, chose to live the law of love even with those who didn’t get along. He’s our model. For an image, Paul points out, Christ became “a sacrificial offering to God for a fragrant aroma.” God was pleased with the smell of his obedient Son.

Think for a moment about the smells that please you. It could be food, drinks, flowers, rainfall, or a campfire. An aroma increases our pleasure.

In Catholic worship, we frequently employ two different aromas. The first arises from chrism, an olive oil into which the bishop has blended spices and has consecrated as a sacred ointment. We use it for once-in-a-lifetime events such as baptism, confirmation, the ordination of a priest, and the dedication of a church and an altar. Parents of newborns frequently tell me they can smell the chrism on their child long after the baptism.

The other aroma is incense. We use it at different times of the Mass—such as the gospel and the consecration. During the preparation of the gifts, we incense the bread and wine, the altar, the cross, the priest and the people. A lot of people don’t like the smell of incense. But we think God does. We incense these offerings including ourselves in hopes that God will find pleasing the aroma of the sacrifices we’ve offered this week—the times we were kind to one another, compassionate and forgiving, the times we removed bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, reviling and malice. We hope that by wearing the perfume of incense, we might become a fragrant aroma pleasing to God.

Even more than incense, God surely finds pleasing the smell of our sweet lives. It is hard to remove all bitterness and reviling, especially if we have made a habit of getting angry. But Paul would tell us, “Remember who you are.” We have been sealed by the Holy Spirit. We’re supposed to act like it.