

Anointed Beforehand!

Exodus 12:1-13, Mark 14:1-11 (ESV)

May 11, 2003

“A woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head.” Here we have as good a picture of salvation, praise, worship, gratitude, love, devotion, and thanksgiving as anywhere in the Bible. This woman was lifted out of herself, lifted out of that self-centeredness which afflicts us all, and transported to that God-centeredness for which we were created, to fellowship with Christ, to utter and complete self-giving, to free and spontaneous love, praise, and worship. What she did was so strange, so foreign, so astounding, that no one except Jesus had a clue as to what she was doing. All they could see was the expense. They could not see the reality, the love, the salvation of her soul taking place before their very eyes.

She had found Jesus “at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper.” Grace Kim’s father, a Presbyterian minister in Korea, has served as pastor in a leper colony. Grace knows what this means. Simon had leprosy, a dread skin disease. It was thought that God had cursed lepers, so they were considered religiously unclean. They were outcasts, forced to live alone, outside of town. No one was supposed to touch them, and they were required by law to warn other people not to come close to them. And yet, Jesus “was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper.” He was staying with a man with whom no one else would or could associate! This is part of who Jesus is and what he is about.

Jesus, already having provoked the chief priests, the elders, the Pharisees, the scribes, and the Sadducees to want to kill him, went to the house of Simon the leper. In defiance of the Old Testament law that ostracized people from the community, Jesus touched the untouchables, socialized with the unclean, broke bread with the outcasts, blessed with his presence the one thought to be cursed by God, entered into relationship with those for whom relationships were illegal, and created community with those who were outside and beyond all community. No wonder they killed him two days later! And yet, so I have hope.

For here we have a picture of Christ’s ministry to us. All of us have messed up our lives. All of us have done things we ought not to have done, and we have left undone those things we ought to have done. We have broken relationships with God and with each other. We have placed ourselves outside human community. The houses of our lives are not in order. And so, it gives me good hope to realize that since Jesus came to be with Simon the leper, he has come to be with me, too.

This is the nature of Christ's ministry. The one who is divine, the Son of God, comes into the messiness of human life, for our sake. He comes to be with us, so we might be with him. Jesus touches us in our untouchableness. Jesus prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies. Jesus calls us into relationship with himself even when we have ruined all our other relationships. Jesus creates us a new community, a new humanity, a new heaven and earth.

One person understood this at that time. "As he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head." This was not some cheap perfume. Even the balsam oil manufactured in that area and used to anoint kings was considered more valuable than gold. But this ointment was made in north India, in the Himalayas, where the plant from which it was made grew. Then it was transported by camel caravan for thousands of miles. So it was not entrusted to common clay pottery. Instead, it was protected in special bottles, carved from alabaster stone. Then in an instant, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, before anyone could move, let alone stop her, this woman broke open the flask and poured the entire contents on Jesus' head. Her gift cost more than three-hundred denarii, at least a year's wages! Can you comprehend that? This woman made a gift all at once worth a year's income!

For those who tithe, giving ten percent of one's income, it takes ten years to give one year's worth of income. For those who give two percent of their income, it takes fifty years. And those who give only one percent of their income will never make it. In their whole lifetime they will never give what she did in a moment. She gave a whole year's income all at once! And the story is not about her goodness. The story is not even about her generosity. The story is about Jesus Christ, who inspired her extravagance, who drew her out of her crippling self-centeredness, whose love was so immense that it elicited her love in return, and whose life and impending death called for her absolute devotion. The gospel is about Jesus Christ, because such gratitude as the woman expressed is not and never can be a human accomplishment; it is a gift generated in her by the one who extended such grace to her. The enormity of her gift was appropriate to the infinity of the grace of the one who inspired it.

When the woman poured the ointment on Jesus' head, she anointed him. This is the way people in the Bible were anointed to be kings. The New Testament word "Christ," just as the Old Testament word "Messiah," means "The Anointed One." The people were expecting the chosen and Anointed One to come from God and save them. In this story, Jesus was anointed. He is the Christ. The woman knew who Jesus was, even though no one else had any idea of what was going on.

To be anointed the Christ was to be called to obedience, suffering, and death. As Jesus said in response, “She has done a beautiful thing to me.... she has anointed my body beforehand for burial.” He holds these two together: to be anointed the Christ is to be anointed for burial. He came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. This woman’s act of love, recognition, extravagance, and worship was a sign that the end had come. The human predicament was so severe that the Son of God had to die to correct the situation. It is not that God was extracting punishment that someone had to pay. Rather, in place of our disobedience, Christ offered perfect obedience, even when it killed him. He made a total commitment of his life. Moreover, the magnitude of his sacrifice for us still lifts even us out of the depths of our self-centeredness and refocuses us upon God and his Christ.

This is what the woman experienced, as she realized before the crucifixion the significance of his death. She had come under the influence of the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus Christ. He captured her heart, soul, mind, and strength. Jesus lifted her out of her selfishness into pure, self-giving love. Here we see salvation like a diamond sparkling in the sun! Would you like to be as free of self-centeredness as she was? The point for us is to follow this woman in looking to Christ on the cross, and so to be drawn out of ourselves.

So, Jesus was in the house of Simon the leper, this woman anointed him beforehand for his burial, and Jesus was moving toward the cross. Day by day, step by step, nearer and nearer he came. Jesus knew, as those who plotted against him did not, when he was going to die. He was in control of his destiny. Part of the point of this story is that Jesus is Lord of the Universe. Jesus was willingly in the house of Simon the leper. Jesus willingly accepted the anointment for burial. And Jesus willingly offered himself in perfect obedience to God’s will as a sacrifice for all the uncleanness and gonewrongness in the world. It is not that Jesus took his own life. He did not. But neither did those who killed him take it against his will. Jesus willingly gave his life. He gave it for Simon the leper. He gave it for the extravagant woman. He gave it for the uncomprehending disciples. And he gave it for you and me.

Now, what does the gospel give to us and elicit from us today? First of all, Christ died for us, and Christ was raised for us, to restore us to right relationship with God and with each other. We are called upon to recognize and acknowledge Jesus for who he is. We are invited and urged to profess our faith in Jesus as the Christ. We are to put our confidence in him as the Anointed One of God. We are called upon to acknowledge that Jesus is the Lord of the universe. We are called upon to worship the God and Father as Jesus makes him known to us. To acknowledge Jesus as the Christ is to quit putting ourselves at the center of the

universe. To worship God is to end all our efforts at self-elevation. To face the future with Christ as our confidence is to throw away all our old self-degradation and pessimism. God has reclaimed us as the children of God, the people of God, and this is our true identity. To love the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ rightly is to love God more than we love self, more than we love each other, more than we love nation, more than we love race, and even more than we love money.

Second, within this restored relationship, we are called upon to worship God rightly. Jesus is clear that this extravagant anointment was a unique form of worship, suited for that one moment in his earthly life. It is not something that can be or needs to be repeated. It is not something that we can do, for Jesus is no longer bodily present among us. Still, we can worship with great love, joy, freedom, simplicity, and integrity. And we can worship God with extravagant tithes and alms. Our tithes and alms do not benefit God, as such. God owns the whole universe! But our tithes and alms express the magnitude of our worship. And they support the mission of God's church, the preaching of God's gospel, the teaching of God's Bible, and the care of God's people.

Third, within this restored relationship, and as an outcome of right worship, we are called upon to help the poor. This may be one of the most misquoted verses in the Bible. Yes, it does say, "You always have the poor with you." But no, that does not mean for us to ignore or neglect them. For Jesus goes on to say, "and whenever you want, you can do good to them." The woman had the unique opportunity to minister directly to Jesus instead of ministering to the poor, so he corrected those who scolded her. Our situation is reversed. With the physical absence of Christ, today we have the opportunity, the responsibility, and the privilege of ministering to the poor. For us to do good to the poor, to feed the hungry, to house the homeless, and to clothe the naked is an integral part of our Christian faith and life.

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To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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5

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