

“Early Thanksgiving”

by Pastor Steve Hammond on 11/10/19

Text: Mark 14:1-11, at FBC of Newport, NH

//Now the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. 2 “But not during the festival,” they said, “or the people may riot.”

3 While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.

4 Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, “Why this waste of perfume? 5 It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages[a] and the money given to the poor.” And they rebuked her harshly.

6 “Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.//

—Mark 14:3-6

This is a most interesting incident. It, or something similar, is in all the Gospels, so it must be quite universally important. In fact, Jesus specifically said it was important. Yet it is very strange to us. When was the last time you saw someone pour perfume over someone’s head as an expression of deep gratitude? Perfume, by the way, that would cost an average person their entire salary for a year (say \$30 or \$40 thousand). Yet it’s possible, even likely, that this was common enough to be understood and not surprising in Jesus’ day.

Luke describes a similar incident happening early on in Jesus’ ministry and it is most likely a separate event, not just one that’s been moved around in the text. In both events people are upset, but they are not upset with the fact that perfume has been poured onto Jesus. In Luke’s case a Pharisee is upset because the woman doing the pouring was a sinner. In Mark and all the other Gospels the upset is due to the great expense of the perfume, saying it could have been sold and given to the poor. Again, they were not upset simply because perfume was poured onto Jesus. They just didn’t think Mary should have used the good stuff.

This act is also interesting for the various reasons implied for its happening. Luke’s incident is a very powerful lesson on the forgiveness of sins and the relationship between that and our love for God and Christ. John strongly implies that the unnamed woman in Mark and Matthew is the sister of Lazarus, Mary, and that she is expressing thanksgiving for Jesus raising up her brother just days earlier. Mark and Matthew, though they don’t identify the woman, do put the event in the context of being in the house of “Simon the leper.” So possibly he was expressing thanks in the

first place. And they put it squarely in the context of being two days before Passover, in the heart of Holy Week.

So there is an interesting summary of the reasons for this act, or acts, of pouring perfume on Jesus: it is an act of thanksgiving for Jesus' forgiveness of sin; and it is an act of thanksgiving for Jesus' raising of the dead. And so just before Jesus' ultimate work of forgiveness, healing, and life giving sacrifice at the cross we have this early expression of thanks. So I don't think it's too much to call this an early thanksgiving. And I love that thought.

Every year it seems we hear of the commercialism revolving around Christmas creeping earlier and earlier toward Thanksgiving, usually culminating on Black Friday right after Thanksgiving. But now they're having 'Black Fridays' *before* Thanksgiving, and not just on Fridays either. Any day will do. It seems to be a battle between Thanksgiving and *Thanksgiving*. Much more interest in the "getting" part, it seems.

Well, today in Mark we have an example of a woman who simply could not wait to offer her thanksgiving and praise to Jesus. It surely could be fueled by something he has already done, but it is in the larger context of what he was about to do. He was about to go to the cross. And her act of pouring out that precious perfume was, in Jesus' own words, "a beautiful thing." Importantly beautiful. So much so that Jesus said the telling of her action would accompany the very heart of the telling of the Gospel itself. And it has. It is in all four of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And we are telling it to this very day.

I realize today is November 10th. Thanksgiving isn't officially here until November 28th. Now I'm not going to tell you we should all be eating turkey and stuffing this afternoon and calling all the families to gather early this year. Though there'd be nothing wrong with that. But the point is much bigger. It's about the rightness and beauty of giving thanks to God in Christ even before we have that for which we are thanking him.

Consider now our own position for an early thanksgiving:

I. Thank him according to his past faithfulness.

This is what pulled the psalmist through in Psalm 77. He was distressed, crying out to God and wondering if there would be any answer from him. But then he remembered to remember God's faithfulness in the past. He ends the Psalm with a description of the parting of the sea for Moses and Aaron.

But, great as that was, we have the work of Christ behind us to remember and to ground our early thanksgiving for what will yet come of that work of Christ when our lives are found in Him.

II. Thank him according to his future promises.

This is virtually every Old Testament saint there is. They had to live from promise to promise. From Adam & Eve's hope in the "seed of the woman" crushing the head of the serpent ... to Noah's year aboard the Ark above the floodwaters over the earth ... to Abraham's promised land and promised son amidst his wanderings and waiting ... to Jeremiah's promised new covenant while Jerusalem was being conquered and her people exiled. All these were *future* promises to them. To us—who are in Christ today—they are listed as God's past faithfulness.

So, surely we need not wait to thank God for what he will *yet* do according to the foundation of what he has already done, and the utter trustworthiness of what is promised yet to come.

Here are some of those "yet to come" promises for those who are "in Christ Jesus" found in just one chapter of the book of Romans, chapter 8.

1. No condemnation. (Romans 8:1-2)

God is not going to turn on you out of frustration, or change the rules, or stand by and watch you drown in your troubles and sin. Condemnation is the way things used to be outside of Christ. But it is no longer relevant in Christ. Worrying about condemnation in Christ would be like Noah worrying about rain inside the Ark. In Christ you now have the freedom to conquer condemnation itself! Thank God for this, even while you may be presently struggling. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, 2 because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death."

2. Redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:23) ... of creation itself.

This is a legitimate hope for any and every believer. As you find your body's limitations growing greater and greater over the years, take some comfort and offer thanksgiving that you will have a new body some day. Thank Him for it early, even now. "Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies."

3. No wasted, futile experiences. (Romans 8:28)

We quote this one a lot. But I wonder to what degree we believe it. Think how thoroughly God has his people under the protection of his wisdom and power and miraculous grace of Christ. There is nothing that can happen to you in the course of the day or in all the days before you that God can not use for his good purposes. This doesn't mean there are no consequences for our poor choices and actions. But it does mean we are not left to our own devices, like a two year old wandering in the woods.

(ILLUS: from Colorado, 2yo child found by a woman on horseback w/dog.) God has already rescued you, in Christ. He's now raising you up proper.

Thank him for the good he will do in the course of your day (and life), even before it unfolds, even if it appears to be bad. Give him thanks for what he can and will do in each and every day. "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

4. No separation from the love of God. (Romans 8:31-39)

This is just *not* going to happen. It's a big world; seems there should be something out there that could come between you and God. Not according to Paul's black list of things disqualified: "38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

God is simply bigger. Greater. His love is not something that can be pulled apart. Divorce is not something he factors into his committed relationships in Christ.

Now some people may wonder if we could separate *ourselves* from God's love. (ILLUS: continued.) That strikes me as wondering if that child who was rescued from being lost in the forest would run away again once she was found and fed and warmed and comforted. Why would she? She separated herself once, yes. And then was rescued. Why would she choose to do it again? And more importantly, why would her rescuer let her go?

Such a wondering would be to confuse Peter with Judas. Both men chose similarly terrible acts against Jesus, one a denial and one a betrayal. But Peter's denial took place under the protection of his rescued relationship with Jesus. This is why Jesus prayed for Peter, died for him, returned to him and restored him.

Judas, however, had a deceptive relationship with Jesus and with all the Apostles. In this anointing with perfume episode Judas and the other disciples objected because of concern for the poor. But according to the Apostle John, Judas was lying when he claimed that. His love was for the money he was stealing from the treasury. Judas was lost already. As close as he was in proximity and position with Jesus, he was not yet rescued. He was already separated from the love of God because he was already outside of Christ. And he was refusing, day after day, to be rescued and found inside of Christ ... where nothing could separate him from God's love.

Give thanks to God for his love in and through Jesus Christ. Give an early thanksgiving today, now, before you even see his face, before you see your full salvation at His return. Thank him, love him, as he has already first loved you.