

"STRATEGY FOR LIVING"
September 15, 1991

TEXT: Mark 14:8 "She has done what she could."

This morning's Scripture presents Jesus in a very strange light. If we did not know better, we would almost think he was callous and indifferent to the needs of the poor. There he was, seated at the table in Simon the Leper's house, when a woman comes in with a flask full of precious ointment and pours it all over his head. Mark tells us the ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, or almost a year's wages for an ordinary laborer.

Shocked by this flagrant waste, the disciples begin to reproach her, but, strangely enough, Jesus does not seem to agree with them. To their surprise, and to ours as well, he says, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me." And then he adds the most incredible thing of all. He says, "For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you will, you can do good to them; but you will not always have me."

Can this be the same Jesus who, in Matthew's Gospel, tells us that the righteous and the unrighteous will be divided in the last judgment solely on the basis of whether or not they have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and visited those who were sick or in prison? Apparently it is. But what did he mean by it? And, more to the point, what lesson does this story have for us today? The answer to those questions can be found in Jesus' next statement: "She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burying."

In his book, The Business of Living, Dr. Jack Grossman writes, "The only strategy for living which makes sense to me is this: Seriously concern yourself about the things you can control or influence." In other words, do what you can. Or as Thomas Carlyle once wrote, "Our grand business is, not to see what lies dimly at a distance, but to do what lies closely at hand."

Do not waste time and energy worrying about the great world issues over which you have little or no control. If you do, you will almost certainly make yourself unhappy. You may even make yourself sick. And, worst of all, you may miss the opportunities you do have because you are too distracted by other things.

Seriously concern yourself about things you can control, or at least influence for the better. In so doing, you will not only be happier and healthier, but more effective as well. To

quote Dr. Grossman once more, "If you concentrate your efforts on your small world you may in time make a contribution toward the larger one."

Now this, of course, is what we so often find it hard to do. Our inclination, like that of the disciples, is to worry about the larger world. Perturbed by what we see on TV or read in the papers, we worry, or complain, or both. We say, "There ought to be a law." Or "Why doesn't someone do something?" And sometimes we feel so frustrated and helpless that we may even fail to apply ourselves to the things we can do something about.

What most of us need is to remember that famous serenity prayer which is used so effectively by Alcoholics Anonymous: "Lord, give me the serenity to accept the things which can not be changed, the willingness to change the things which can be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference between them." Or, in the words of this morning's scripture, "Lord, help me to do what I can."

But how do we do that? There are two different ways, either one of which is sensible and effective. You can start either with the needs around you or with the talents within. Either way works, and, as far as I can tell, which one you should choose is more or less a matter of personal preference.

The woman in this morning's scripture chose the first way. Here was Jesus, visiting in the house of a neighbor. And she asked herself, "What can I do to be helpful?" "I know," she thought, "no doubt he is hot and dusty and tired from his day's journey. I will go to him and anoint his head with some of this precious ointment. Its lovely fragrance will refresh him and give him happiness." The fact that, in her excitement, she overdid a good thing and doused him with the whole bottle is almost incidental. The important thing is that she saw a need, asked herself what she could do about it, and then did it. No wonder Jesus defended her and said of her, "She has done a beautiful thing to me."

And that is what our Board of Christian Fellowship has done, too. They saw, not one, but two needs: one in our church for more Christian fellowship and one in the community for more available housing. And, putting these two needs together, they said, "Why don't we take on a Habitat for Humanity housing project. We have the financial and human resources to refurbish an old house so that some low income family can have a decent home. And, in the process, we can offer our own congregation the opportunity to have a good time and good fellowship working together on a worthwhile project."

They brought that possibility to the annual meeting, where it was discussed and passed. And we now have a house which we are in the process of making into a decent home. I hope you will take the time to go down to that house after church to see what is being done and to meet the family who will eventually live

there. The Board of Christian Fellowship members will be there to show you around and to offer some light refreshment. And, if you do not come away proud of this church, I will be very surprised indeed.

But the other approach is also effective. Only there, instead of starting with a need, we begin with ourselves. In his book, "In Quest of a Kingdom", Leslie Weatherhead writes, "God has planted in every human heart some talent, and God is not asking that you be called famous by the world but that He should be able to say to you, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. What I lent to you you used to the very best advantage, and the whole kingdom of heaven is richer because you passed through the world.'"

In other words, do not waste time and energy feeling bad about the things you can not do. "Do what you can!" Do not make the excuse that you are not brilliant, or rich, or powerful. Everyone has something he or she can do. Surely that is at least part of what Jesus meant in his parable of the talents. The servant with only one talent was not condemned because he did not have five talents, or even ten. He was punished because he did not use the one he had. And in life, as in that parable, every servant has at least one. And, like Dwight Moody we can all say, "I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And that which I can do, by the grace of God, I will do."

"All right," you may say, "but what if I honestly don't know what talents I may have?" In that case, you either start with the needs about you or you can ask the help of someone whose judgment you trust. You can go to him or her and say, "I want to do something to make this a little better world. It does not have to be something big, but I want to do something. In all honesty, what talents, large or small, do you think I have?" You may be surprised by what they tell you. They may see talents in you that you never knew you had. And, when they tell you, listen! Their voice may be God's way of calling you to make a difference.

One application of what I have been saying obviously lies in service to your church. But this is no commercial, no sneaky way of getting more volunteers for the Habitat House or for anything else. There is much more at stake than that. The great Austrian psychotherapist, Erich Fromm, said that man's greatest need is that somehow our lives should have meaning. And the Good News is that they do. God has given each of us some talent, some ability, which He needs to make this the kind of world He is trying to create. He does not ask that we be brilliant or famous, only that, like the woman in today's scripture, we do what we can.