

SERMONS

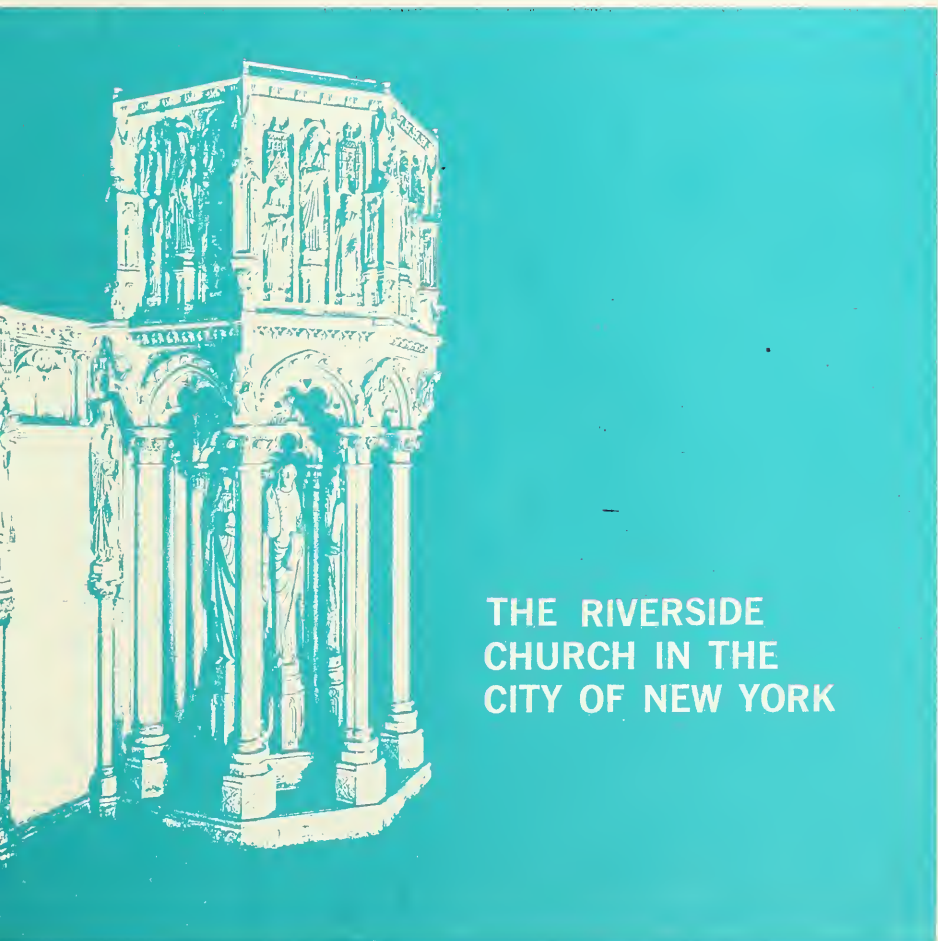
FROM RIVERSIDE

ON DOING WHAT WE CAN

"She hath done what she could."

Mark 14:8

Dr. Ernest T. Campbell



THE RIVERSIDE
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Did you know that one can get the correct time in New York City by dialing N-E-R-V-O-U-S? In Berkeley, California the equivalent number spells P-O-P-C-O-R-N.

I'm not prepared to comment on what Berkeley and popcorn have in common. But how suggestive it is that "time" and "nervous" should be fortuitiously combined by Mother Bell!

We are presently a nation of nervous, edgy people. Hours of agony intersperse our moments of joy. Experiences that disturb us by far outnumber experiences that satisfy.

In a world that screams its pain into our ears twenty-four hours a day, how can anything we do be described as satisfying?

Some of us will remember John Updike's novel, Rabbit Run. It is the story of a young man who was a hero on the basketball floor who found that as he aged, his skills diminished and the fans who remembered him "when" gradually died off. In his maturity he walked out to a golf course one day, where another character in the book, a minister, turned to him and said, "What the hell do you want?" Rabbit Angstrom swung a golf club, lofted a beautiful shot and answered, "That's what I want. I want to do something well." 1

Given the boisterous, demanding world we have today, it is hard to feel about anything we do that we have done it well!

* * *

Push the hold button on that thought for a moment and look again at the story of the woman who anointed

Jesus with the costly ointment. All four gospels tell about this incident. Although it must be conceded that the various writers are anything but unanimous on the details.

In Luke the woman involved is described as "a sinful woman." Mark and Matthew say simply "a woman." John identifies the person involved with Mary the sister of Lazarus. In Luke the incident takes place during the Galilean period of Jesus' ministry in the home of Simon the Pharisee. In Mark and Matthew it takes place in Bethany at the home of Simon a leper. In John, the scene is Bethany, but the house is that of Lazarus.

However that may be, there is no doubting the fact that Jesus had such an experience. A woman who obviously cared, showed her adoration. Jesus was seated for the meal in the traditional fashion, semi-reclined, when this woman entered the room, opened an expensive jar of ointment and poured it generously over his body. She anointed Him, as Jesus said, against the day of his burial. (Mark 14:8)

This lavish deed could only suggest to the warped mind of Judas how this wealth might have been put to better use. "Rubbish!" Judas cries in the unrevised translation of Martin Luther -- a rendering that found its way into the text of Bach's "St. Matthew Passion." "Rubbish! Why was not this ointment sold and the money given to the poor?" Consider his nerve, daring to light a candle for the oppressed in the presence of Jesus!

* * *

For the encouragement of our souls, I want to underscore the response that Jesus made in defense of this woman's action. His reaction is gathered up in two sentences. "She hath done a good thing!" "She hath done what she could."

What warmed Jesus' heart about this woman's deed was the fact that she acted out her love. This is sound Biblical religion. Within the purview of scripture, love is something you do. It is more a verb than a noun.

Because love is something you do, it is always experienced in specific times and places. As one of our contemporary theologians has put it -- and note his words carefully -- "It may sound harsh at first, but we have to note that neither the Old Testament nor the New speaks of a love for man as such and therefore for all men; of a universal love of humanity. As the Bible understands it, love both for God and for man has the character of an action. The universal love of humanity can be thought of, if at all, only as an idea which dominates man or an attitude of mind which fills him. But Christian love is an act of obedience which as such, even if we think of a sequence of such acts, takes place somewhere in time and space, which does not, therefore take place always and everywhere, but in which there is always a demarcation and limitation of its object or objects. It is the concrete and not the abstract loving of someone who is concrete and not abstract." 2

But here's the rub. Because love is always done in specific acts that occur in a particular time and place, it can always be second-guessed by some Judas -- without or within. Let's grant the possibility that Judas was right. Perhaps there was a better alternative. Perhaps money could have been salvaged from the ointment and given to the poor.

We are told in the synoptic gospels that all the disciples joined in the murmuring. It may be that each of them had his own idea of how the money could have been more wisely spent. It is conceivable that Peter and Andrew might have opted for the money going to a pension fund for retired fishermen. It is conceivable that John, with his love for people, might

have opted for the money being spent on homeless children. Matthew, who had worked for the government, might well have known of men in prison who needed to be bailed out.

As soon as love moves to act in history it opens itself to speculation. Anytime we express our love concretely, questions arise. Why here, and not there? Why this, and not that? Why this much and not more? None of us has the perfect overview to see what most needs doing. Every man's perception is colored by the range of his own experience, by the maturity of his faith, and by the resources at his command.

But Jesus, in one of His most magnanimous utterances, declared in favor of the woman. Imperfect though her deed, he said of this loving soul, "She has done what she could." Done what she could? Surely not in any absolute sense. One does not get the impression that what she did took her down to the last dime. One does not get the impression that she had made any kind of a survey on what needed to be done in those parts. Nevertheless, the Lord said, "She did what she could." Given that time, given that circumstance, given her level of awareness and experience, she had done her best.

There may have been good reasons why she could not give to the poor. Perhaps psychologically she could not bring herself to part with the ointment for money. It may be that this treasure had come down in the family and that the very thought of cashing it in was unthinkable. She may have had practical limitations. Perhaps she had been freshly widowed and was unfamiliar with the market. She may not have known the worth of the ointment or how to haggle for it. Perhaps socially she didn't know any poor people. Jesus gave us some early Emily Post advice on how to throw a feast. He said, if you want to really throw a party don't invite those who can invite you back but go and find the unscrubbed, the oppressed and the

poor. (Luke 14:13) I have often wondered how many of us could get up such a guest list. Many of us do not know even one poor person.

Perhaps emotionally she was incapable of restraining her adoration. She might have been one of those expansive types who act more on impulse than on thought.

Taking such considerations into mind, and many others, Jesus declared without qualification, "She hath done what she could." In that word of commendation he insured the woman, and us through her, that when less than perfect people act in a less than perfect world, God's love makes up the difference between the deed and the intention. "She hath done what she could."

* * *

Let me return to the point with which we started. We live today with a nervous feeling that nothing we do, or ever could do, matters. Our generous actions, we have come to believe, simply will not stick or carry. Thus, we very rarely get satisfaction out of anything we give -- whether of time or money or services.

I suspect that your mail is pretty much like mine. I feel that I must be on everybody's list. Not a day goes by but what the mail at home and at the office solicits me in one direction or another. Somewhere along the line one must say, "So far, and no further." "This much and no more." As the quotation from Karl Barth showed, love must shut off other objects in order to be responsive to particular situations. Our anxiety in this area stems largely from the fact that our knowledge of what needs doing has markedly increased while our resources haven't. Anything we do for any cause or person can be relativized into insignificance by the mere thought that so much more needs doing.

The saving question here is this, Did you do what

you could? Given your resources, given your life experiences, given your level of awareness, given the measure of your opportunity -- did you do what you could?

If I understand Jesus in this incident, He is suggesting that God respects our limitations and that we ought to respect them too! When we do what we can, God encircles the act and protects it against the judgments of subsequent history. He validates it as good. He gives us inner satisfaction.

* * *

Next Sunday is a critical day in the life of this church. I could speak with considerable feeling about the struggle we're involved in with rising costs and shrinking dollars. I could speak with emotion about aspects of our program that will be in jeopardy should we fall short of our goal. I could attempt to speak persuasively about the fact that if all of those who give to Riverside would increase their giving by 10% we would reach our goal and then some.

But if I chose that route, if I tried to lay a guilt trip on you regarding your monetary obligations, the same thing would happen that always happens; those who are already giving to the point of sacrifice would feel uneasy and bend to give more. The 54% of this congregation who do not pledge would go on living off the rest of us.

And so at the risk of failing to arouse the 54%, I want today to assure the generous among us that what they are doing matters. One of the Stewardship displays to be seen in the Cloister area contains a statement with which I am in total agreement: "The giving of ourselves and what we have should produce satisfaction."

* * *

"She has done what she could." God's love quickens ours. His gifts beget our generosity.

"She has done what she could." Can you think of a better inscription for a pledge card? Or for an epitaph?

"She has done what she could." More God does not ask. Less we would not give. OR WOULD WE?

CLOSING PRAYER

*O Thou who art the same from age to age, and
who alone canst establish the work of our
hands upon us,
Save us from such cynicism and unbelief as
would lead us to wash our hands of any
responsibility for others;
And at the same time guard us against such
need to do the perfect deed as would
leave us un-satisfied with anything we do.
Forgive our sins, and redeem our virtues,
for in both we need Thy grace.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

FOOTNOTES:

1. Updike, John, Rabbit, Run, Fawcett Publications, Greenwich, Connecticut, 1960.
2. Barth, Karl, Church Dogmatics, Vol. IV, 64-68, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1958, p. 802-3.

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