

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC
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The Rev. J. Barry Kramer
"The Missing Ingredient"

"Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing...'"
[Mark 10:21 NRSV]

I make a fantastic Caesar's salad! It was my turn to cook the other night, so I decided on pork chops, slathered with garlic and cooked on the grill; broccoli, with a melted cheddar cheese sauce; and my "killer" salad - my absolutely terrific Caesar's salad.

Everything was together. There was plenty of gas for the grill, plenty of garlic, fresh broccoli, cheese, etc. For the salad - fresh Romaine, extra virgin olive oil, a good brand of anchovies, a fresh, organically grown egg (so I could use the whole thing), Worcestershire sauce, dried mustard, salt, pepper, croutons, and Romano cheese, freshly ground, of course. The preparations began with the making of the dressing for the salad. First the oil, then the chopped garlic and minced anchovies, Worcestershire, mustard (I don't measure, just use a "dollup"), and stir in the egg. Then let it sit, waiting until the last minute to add the lemon. The what? The Lemon! Frantically I searched the refrigerator for a lemon, then the fruit basket, then a frantic call to my wife, "Sweet Pea, do we have any lemons?" "No, I used the last one yesterday." No lemons. You can't make a Caesar's salad without a lemon. I was missing *the key ingredient!*

It's the same way in life. We often have plans, but cannot carry them out because of a missing ingredient. We have the recipe, all the "fixin's" except one, and someone waiting for the finished product is left disappointed. Too often we are kept from doing what we want to do because we are held back by something we lack.

How many of you like to put together jigsaw puzzles? How many times have you gotten one almost all together, only to discover that one or two pieces are missing? We look in the box, on the carpet, under the sofa, in the closet, but end up frustrated because we can't complete the project. There is some ingredient missing from the picture.

Our Gospel lesson today suggests a similar situation. A man runs up and kneels before Jesus and asks what it takes to have a complete, fulfilling life. Jesus runs through the usual list of ingredients, according to the traditional Jewish recipe known as the Ten Commandments. The man indicates that he can check off each one. He had not broken a single commandment since he was a child! And yet, there was a lingering feeling of incompleteness in his life. Jesus looks carefully at him in a loving way and perceives a missing ingredient. The man loves his money so much that it prevents him from loving others. Jesus says, *"You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."* Another way to say it might be that the man had all the pieces to the puzzle, but the last one didn't fit. It was the wrong Ingredient. Most of us probably do not inquire, or even pray, about the ingredients necessary to "inherit eternal life." Instead, we ask about what it takes to have the good life, or what it means to be a good person. We

assume that what is involved is doing good things and refraining from doing bad things. How shocking it would be for Jesus to tell us that our understanding of goodness falls short of what he had in mind.

For the young man who confronted Jesus, it was a matter of priorities, barriers to complete trust in God, an unwillingness to devote himself to caring for the poor, and a failure to go "all the way" in obedience to the will of God. What all that added up to was "the missing ingredient" of a total commitment to the ways of God. Nothing was supposed to come between him and God in Christ. Money separated this rich man from God. It blocked out a vision of doing something more. This man sought meaning and purpose in life through an accumulation of riches.

There is a wonderful story about Henry Ford that illustrates this point. One time Henry had occasion to ask a young engineer about his ambition in life. The young man replied, "to become very rich; everything else is secondary." Days later, Mr. Ford handed the young man a package containing a pair of eyeglasses. Ford removed the glasses and placed two silver dollars in the frames. He asked the man to put on the glasses. Henry then asked, "What do you see?" "Nothing!" the man replied, "The money blocks out everything." To which Henry suggested, "Maybe you should rethink that ambition of yours!"

The young man in our Gospel lesson suffered from the same problem. He could see nothing but his wealth. He had followed all the rules. He thought he had everything that he needed, so Jesus' words hit him hard: "*You lack one thing...*" He thought he had all the ingredients for the recipe of life. No wonder he went away "shocked and grieving!" For all his riches, he could not pay the price. Ironically, *his deficiency was his abundance*.

Isn't that true for most of us today: our deficiency is our abundance? I mean, think about it. Compared to most of the rest of the world, we who worship here today have it made! We worship in a beautiful church building; we dress in nice clothes; we drive decent cars to get here; we even have enough money so that we can give some away to others! By the standards of many others around the world, we *are* rich! So how is it that we can even begin to think that we might all inherit eternal life? We think we have all the ingredients, but could it be that we, too, "lack one thing...?"

My visit to the Holy Land revealed many things to me. For example, after seeing the city of Jerusalem, I understood for the first time many of the sayings of Jesus. Today's lesson is one of those teachings. Jesus said, "*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.*" Good Lord, they said. Who then can be saved? Indeed, how can any of us expect to do that?

My understanding came when our guide showed us the East Wall of Jerusalem. In addition to the "Golden Gate," through which the Messiah will enter, there was a small, narrow entrance, through which supplies could be passed during an attack. People and pack animals, like camels, could only enter *after they had been unloaded*, because the opening was in the shape of the eye of a needle! The inference was immediately obvious: you have to unload *all your burdens* before you can enter this gate. For Jesus, the gate symbolizes the entrance to the kingdom, to eternal life, and you can't go through it until you unload, "unhook" yourself from, all your worldly possessions. In order to "have it all" we need to let go of those things which block our relationship with God, and

with others. We need to let go of all the other ingredients in order to gain the **one** that counts. The question is, "how?"

There are no "pat" answers. But my own experience teaches me that whenever I worry about things financial, my white blood count goes higher. Whenever one of my "possessions" gets in the way of my relationship with God, my life changes direction and I feel "out of harmony" with the Creation. Whenever I put a dollar bill in front of my face, I can't see clearly. My attachment to things material always disrupts my spiritual connections. God! How then can I be saved?

"For mortals," Jesus said, "it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." This must mean that it is possible for God to supply the missing ingredient. We need only to look beyond our abundance to the Divine source of all things. The missing ingredient is a simple "yes" to Jesus, and it will work in every situation. Life's recipe will be complete. With Jesus, salvation, eternal life, is ours.

The Caesar's salad was saved by a lime. Yes, a lime! The salad tasted fine. It wasn't the original ingredient, but not bad for a substitute. Perhaps, like Jesus, the key ingredient was never missing. Perhaps, like Jesus, it was there all the time!