

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
October 14, 2018  
Pentecost 21  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Amos 5:6-15  
Psalm 90  
Hebrews 3:1-6  
Mark 10:17-

Our Gospel lesson this morning is the story of the rich young ruler who comes to Jesus. It is perhaps one of the more familiar Gospel stories to most of us.

To be honest, I empathize with this young man. It is easy to criticize him, to demonize him right from the start. But I feel for him.

Why? Well, think about Jesus' words to him: *One thing you lack*. Really? Only one thing? I don't know about you, but if I had my life so put together that Jesus would only identify *one thing lacking*, that would be a pretty good thing.

But after further thought, it might not be as good a thing as I think. I remember the time a while back when I decided to bake a cake. I gathered all the necessary ingredients together and went to work. But in the process I forgot to include the eggs. Just one thing was lacking. But that one thing rendered the cake inedible.

Many of you here today appreciate great literature, especially the great tragedies. Consider Shakespeare's Macbeth. Macbeth was a splendid soldier, of

lofty courage and unspeakable resolve. He was generous and loyal. Macbeth was not a bad man.

But what happened? Macbeth had a glaring weakness. He was overcome by insatiable ambition. *Only one thing* – but it was the root of tragedy.

Psychologists and novelists long after Shakespeare have written volumes describing what each of us knows, that *one* small fault can grow to take over a person's whole life, consuming that life in tragic ways.

Most tragedies, whether long ago or right now, are not so much the stories of *bad* people; tragedies are the stories of *good* people who do the *wrong* thing.

Consider this young ruler who comes to Jesus. He is quite aware of his own stellar achievements. He is prepared to tell Jesus about them, and there is no reason at all for us to doubt his sincerity or his integrity. He is the kind of person who, if he came to Epworth today, we would welcome him and even encourage him to assume leadership in our congregation.

And yet this man knows that something is missing in his life. He wants to find what he calls "eternal life." We don't know exactly how to define "eternal life," but that doesn't really matter here. We all know intuitively what this man means. He has money. He has moral integrity. His life is pretty put together. And yet he is not content. *He doesn't know what he wants, but he won't be happy until he gets it.*

Perhaps you know someone like that. Perhaps that someone is *you*. You've kept the rules all your life. You are a moral and ethical person. You live with integrity. But deep down in your soul you know that there is something missing. One thing you still lack. *The burning question is: What is that one thing?*

Some might think that the answer lies in a deeper knowledge of Christianity and the teachings of the Faith. And, while there is no doubt that most Christians should be better instructed in the Faith than they are, a deeper intellectual grasp of Christianity is not the "one thing" that is lacking.

Others might think that it is merely a matter of "trying harder," of "doing more," or exerting a stronger moral effort. But while there are Christians today who have grown lazy and complacent, pulling yourself up by your own moral bootstraps is not the answer to what is lacking.

To answer this question, we must return to the text, and to Jesus' words to this young man. He tells him: *One thing you lack. Go, sell what you have, give the money to the poor; then come and follow me.*

At the risk of sounding like I'm trying to soften the force of Jesus' words, I must say that I do not believe that Jesus' words are a *universal* command to every Christian. To read it in this way would be to misunderstand both the Gospel and the Scriptures. This command of Jesus is not applicable to every Christian,

although I would say that many people would find it easier to accept the Gospel if they were less materialistically comfortable than they are.

But this particular command of Jesus to this young man is the application of a *general principle*. *It means for this young man that he has to turn his back on the dearest thing in his life and follow Jesus in trust and obedience.* It means that all of the good things in life are not good enough without an act of complete surrender to Jesus Christ. Money and material things are not enough. We know that. We know that the Kingdom of God is not for sale.

But moral goodness is not enough, either. And this is more difficult for us to accept and believe. John Wesley struggled with it. He was the obedient son of his mother. He was the industrious student at Charter House, the disciplined Fellow at Lincoln College, Oxford. He was the devoted missionary who came to America to convert the heathen, but who in frustration then cried out, “Who will convert me?”

What was lacking? What was lacking, in John Wesley, in this rich young man who comes to Jesus? And what is lacking for many of us?

Simply this: *What is lacking is a personal encounter of faith in Jesus Christ.* That sounds so obvious, but I’m not talking in the abstract. I’m not talking in generalities. I’m talking about the kind of passionate encounter with Jesus Christ that is as concrete as selling your possessions and giving away your money. *I’m*

*talking about that part of you and your life that you are tempted to hold back for yourself, that part of you that you are afraid to give to him in full surrender.*

Jesus stands in our midst today, and says to us what he said to this rich young ruler: *One thing you lack.* One area of your life where you are afraid to trust me. One area of your life where you struggle to surrender your will to mine.

And what he says next is not the same as what he said to the rich young man, although for some it might be. But what Jesus says to each one of us is as *individual* as each one of us.

And by the grace of God, it is only when we surrender that part of us completely to Jesus that we will begin to be at peace. He loves us too much to have it any other way.

As we come to the Table this morning, I'm going to ask you to allow Jesus to speak to you as he did this young man so many years ago. What is he wanting to say to you? Where is the Spirit speaking to you, in the depths of your heart?

As you open your hands to receive his love to you in the bread and the wine, give that one thing – whatever it is – to him. Let him hold you in his arms and heal you. Let his love comfort and empower you. Let him show you the joy that comes from complete surrender.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.