

Season of Pentecost - Stewardship & Generosity (Week 1)

August 18/19

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 131; Matthew 6: 19-34

Grace to you and peace from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

Jesus teaches, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear . . . But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness.” (Matt. 6: 25, 33a) Maybe it’s gathering about the Lord’s Table this morning or the bounty of summer produce, but Jesus’s pleas in today’s gospel reminded me of the story of Stone Soup. It goes something like this:

Once upon a time, a stranger rode his tired horse down a backcountry road on his way home from a long journey. It was late in the afternoon and the man was tired and hungry. He saw a small village ahead. “I’ll get something to eat there and find a place for the night,” he thought.

Suddenly the horse tripped, throwing the stranger to the ground. He brushed himself off and saw that the tired horse had stumbled over a rock sticking out of the ground in the middle of the road. He dug it out of the earth so it would not trip anyone else. It was a nice looking rock, almost perfectly round and smooth. The stranger decided to take it along. He put it in his saddlebag, climbed up on his horse, and continued.

As he rode past the first house, the village people stopped to stare. He waved to several of them, but no one waved back. He got off his horse and approached a woman standing in front of a small house. “Good evening,” he said cheerfully, “Could you spare a bit of food for a hungry traveler?”

The woman began shaking her head almost before he had finished his sentence. “We have had a poor harvest here. We are very worried that there is barely enough for our family. I am sorry.” And she walked into her house and shut the door.

The man continued to the next house where a farmer was working on his wagon. "Do you have a place at your table for a hungry traveler?" he asked.

"It didn't rain during the last month before harvest," the farmer said. "What little we have is needed for our children."

At every home the stranger heard the same sad story: the harvest had been poor, there was not enough food to make it through the winter. Everyone was very worried about themselves and their immediate family.

Completely discouraged and very hungry, the man sat down under a tree in the village square. "Poor people," he thought, "in a few weeks they will be as hungry as I am." Suddenly an idea hit him. He reached into his saddlebag, took out the stone and addressed the villagers. "Gentle folk of the village," he shouted, "Your worries are over. I have in my hand a special stone that will help take you through the long winter. This is a magic stone. With it you can make stone soup."

"Stone soup?" an old man repeated, "I have never heard of stone soup."

"The wonder of stone soup," the stranger continued, "is that it not only feeds hungry people, it also brings people together. Now who has a large empty pot?"

Quickly a huge iron pot was found and delivered to the stranger in a wheelbarrow. "The kettle is barely large enough, but it will do," the stranger said. "Now we must fill the pot with water and start a fire."

Eager hands carried buckets of water and firewood. Soon the pot was placed over a roaring fire. As the water began to boil the stranger dramatically raised the magic stone above his head, and then he gently placed it in the kettle.

"Stone soup needs salt and pepper," the stranger announced. Two children ran to find salt and pepper.

After the water had boiled a few minutes, he sipped the brew. "This stone makes an excellent soup, but it would be better if we had a few carrots."

"We have a few carrots that we're willing to share," a farmer replied. Immediately his daughter ran home and returned with an apron full of carrots.

"It's too bad the harvest was so bad," said the stranger, "Stone soup is always much more tasty when we add a cabbage or two," "I think I know where to find a cabbage," a young mother shouted and she soon returned with three large cabbages.

The stranger was busy slicing carrots and cabbages with his hunting knife. "The last time I made stone soup was at the castle of a rich man. He added a few potatoes and a bit of beef."

Several people commented, "A bit of beef and we can eat like rich people," they whispered. They went home and soon returned with not only beef and potatoes, but others bought some milk, onions and barley, too.

By the time the soup was ready it was almost dark. It was the most delicious soup they had ever smelled and to think -- it all came from the magic stone. The stranger finally declared it was done and invited everyone to have as much as they could eat.

After everyone had eaten their full, some folks brought out their fiddles. Everyone began to sing and dance. The fun continued into the wee hours of the morning. Never had the village people had such a wonderful party.

The next morning all the villagers gathered to say goodbye to the stranger. As he mounted his horse a small child called out, "You forgot to take your magic stone!"

The stranger smiled, "I am going to leave the stone with you as my gift of gratitude for your hospitality. Remember --- as long as you make stone soup, you will never have to worry about being hungry."

Jesus tells the disciples, who have left everything to follow him, not to worry about what they will eat, drink or wear, "your heavenly Father knows that you need all of these." Understand, Jesus is not proposing some glib "Don't worry, be happy," --"the sun will come out tomorrow" --- "fiddle-dee-dee, I'll worry about that tomorrow" philosophy for living. Famine, exile, unmet budgets, unemployment, worn out phone systems, debts and uncertainty in all its varieties are real, not senseless or silly concerns that Jesus is casually brushing aside. What is it that Jesus is trying to teach us about facing such adversity or the anxiousness of unknown tomorrows? What do you do, if like Lewis and Clark, you expected to cross the continent in canoes and suddenly come face to face with the Rocky Mountains?

Fears drains us of strength and gratitude and hope. When we focus on what we don't have it's harder to remember God's eternal commitment and faithfulness, it's harder to see possibilities. When the stranger offered them the gift of stone soup, they were no longer captives of their despair and anxiety. **With hope, they were freed to look at what they had differently.** That was the magic of the stone. What had seemed to be scarcely enough became more than enough. The resources they had fearfully been protecting from others became available to share. Through the stranger's compassion and wisdom, what had appeared hopeless bought them together and led to celebration.

It seems to me that Jesus was fond of making stone soup. He didn't try to tell his disciples that hunger, housing and clothing weren't real concerns. He didn't scold or belittle them. He told them about the birds of the air and the lilies in the

field, beautiful and cared for by their heavenly Father. With their belief and attention upon the faithfulness and love of God --- like the stone in the soup pot ----- they would be freed to look at their circumstances differently . . . they *might* find they DID have some carrots that could be brought to the pot . . . they *might* discover that with their trust in God there WAS enough and life was tasty with peace and gratitude stewing in most days. It's not magic but faith in God's goodness, bounty and faithfulness that provides disciples of Jesus (us!) with hope, courage and energy for meaningful living and grateful generosity.

“Remember” the stranger said, “as long as you make stone soup, you will never have to worry about being hungry.” What if we looked at our families, the church and world as a huge brewing pots already brewing which God's love and gifts, forgiveness and freedom? What do each of us have to throw into God's world saving stew? Maybe what you have to offer is kindness, hospitality, insight, skillful hands, generosity, prayer, laughter. We all have time, talents and treasures that were made to be shared with joy, not hoarded in fear. God does not create any of us empty handed. What marvelous, loving recipe is God brewing here at Haven, and in your life? Come and see what God can make of us. Come ---- bring who you are and what you have to the Haven mix of mission and ministry — and see the stone soup of grace God wants to prepare for our community through us. Amen

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(revised 11/27/03 Thanksgiving Day sermon)