

Stone Soup

2 Kings 4:38-44

Perhaps you recall hearing this story when you were in school:

A trio of weary travelers arrived in a village, carrying nothing more than an empty cooking pot. Going door to door they asked the villagers to share some of their food. At each house they were turned down, being told times were hard and they only had enough for their own families. The trio discussed the situation and came up with a plan – one would build a fire in the town square, the other would fill the pot with water to set over the fire, and the third would find a large stone to put in the pot. As the water boiled and the trio took turns stirring the pot, a curious villager came to ask what they were doing. The travelers responded that they were making "stone soup", which tastes wonderful and they would be happy to share with the villager, but it still needed another ingredient or two to improve the flavor.

The villager said he had a few carrots he would be happy to provide, if he could have some of the soup when it was ready. The trio gladly accepted his offer. Another villager walked by, inquiring about the pot, and the travelers again mentioned their stone soup which had not yet reached its full potential. More and more villagers walk by each adding another ingredient until the pot

was full of potatoes, onions, cabbages, peas, celery, tomatoes, corn, meat, milk, butter, salt and pepper. Finally, the stone was removed from the pot, and a delicious and nourishing pot of soup was enjoyed by the travelers and villagers alike.

This story is told in a variety of ways in different countries and parts of the world. The moral remains the same: when we work together, we can achieve much.

In our Bible story today, the prophets in Gilgal, much like the villagers in the story, were feeling the effects of the current famine. Fortunately for them, the famine was of food only and not the Spirit of the Lord. At this time Elisha was their visiting teacher. Understanding that his students would learn better with full bellies, he told his servant, Gehazi, to put on the large pot and make some stew for the group.

As in the story of stone soup, it is likely that each of the students contributed what he had on hand to the stew. One enterprising student went out to the countryside and collected some gourds to add to the pot. In this area there are several plants that resemble cucumbers, but not all are edible. It would appear from the story that this well-meaning student had brought back one of the bitter fruits and added it to the stew.

While the villagers and travelers in the story of stone soup, enjoyed a tasty stew, the company of prophets thought they were being poisoned, calling out to Elisha, “Teacher, there is death in the pot!” Elisha’s

response was similar to Moses' throwing a stick into bitter water to make it sweet for the exiles in the desert. Elisha calls for some flour which when added to the stew removes the bitterness and the prophets are able to eat their fill.

This one meal, however, will not maintain them forever. We next read of a man coming from a nearby town bringing bread and grain. It was not uncommon for people of faith to bring such grain offerings to the priests of the Lord God. However, when Jeroboam had risen to power in Israel, he had constructed many altars to pagan idols. Upset by this change of events, all the consecrated priests left the country to go to Jerusalem in Judea to serve in the Temple. With all the priests gone, but knowing there was a company of prophets nearby, this man likely was continuing his practice of bringing grain offerings to the Lord, even if not to a consecrated priest.

Elisha graciously accepted the offering and told his servant to distribute the bread to the gathered company. His servant's response would be a foreshadowing of a future conversation between a teacher and his followers:

⁵ When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?"

⁷ Philip answered him, “It would take more than half a year’s wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!”

⁸ Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up, ⁹ “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?”

¹⁰ Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

¹² When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.” ¹³ So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

Just as the disciples followed Jesus’ directions, so Elisha’s servant followed instructions to distribute the bread and grain to the 100 prophets. The men ate their fill and there was still bread left over, for the Lord had said, “they will eat and have some left over.” Whether it be feeding 100 or 5,000, a profound faith in the ability of the Almighty to

provide is made manifest in the remnants of what was originally a very small offering.

Let's look at some of the similarities between Elisha's meal and Jesus' picnic on a hill. In both cases, a small gift of food was given to the teacher to share with a larger group. The teacher himself did not distribute the gift but asked others to put their hands to the task of distribution. The final distribution of goods exceeded the need of those who were being fed. Now I must ask this questions, "What do you have in your hand?" Well, not literally here this morning, but stay with me.

How often do we see a problem, want to do something to help, but think we don't have the (and pick your favorite excuse here) time, money, flexibility, connections, etc.? In all three stories this morning we have heard about people who felt they did not have enough to make a difference. The villagers felt they did not have enough to share. Gehazi didn't think twenty barley loaves (likely a form of flat bread) was not enough to meet the needs of 100 or so adults. And whoever would have believed that 5 of those same barley loaves and 2 small fish could begin to satisfy so large a crowd, let alone provide leftovers. Yet in each case, all had their hunger sated, with some left to share with whoever showed up next.

Back to my questions then, "What do you have in your hand?" Do you have an idea that if shared with friends and family might take on life to

meet the needs of others? Do you know of an organization that would benefit from a donation of your old clothes, newspapers, lawn mower, car or boat? Do you have two hours a week to volunteer at our food bank, a local thrift shop, or other non-profit organization. When was the last time you pulled out the sofa cushions to find loose change? That loose change (which you haven't missed until now) could be dropped in the collection plate to help fund the work of the church. It doesn't matter what it is you have in your hand, with faith in the Father of us all, whatever it is you have can be multiplied to benefit others.

Once you have identified what you have in your hand do not be deterred by the voices that try to tell you there are other deficiencies you have not considered. Things like, "I'm too old/young to do this." Sarah bore a son when she was 90, Daniel was almost 90 when he spent a night in the lions' den, and David killed a bear, a lion, and a giant when he was just a youngster. Another good one, "I don't speak well enough to share this idea." Moses struggled with his speech, so God gave him his brother Aaron to be his spokesperson.

In each of today's stories it was a gathered community that made good happen. Leaders, helpers, and recipients all were blessed by God to fulfill His purpose. So, it shall be with us. Identify what you have in your hand, ask God to multiply what that is to His purpose, then be prepared to see what happens next. The moral of our "stone soup" story

will be that when we all work together, and God is in the mix, we will achieve even more!

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