

St. Paul's Congregational Church
November 18, 2018; Thanksgiving B
Joel 2:21-27; Matthew 6:25-33
Do Not Fear
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

This year I've been drawn again to one of the great Thanksgiving stories – the story of Stone Soup – yes, you've heard me speak about it before – there are many versions of it around for sure – and this one goes like this:

Once upon a time a stranger rode his tired horse down a back country road on his way home from a long journey. It was late afternoon and the man was tired and hungry. Ahead he saw a small village. "I'll get something to eat there and find a place for night," he thought.

Suddenly the horse tripped, throwing the stranger to the ground. As he brushed himself off, he saw that the horse had stumbled over a rock sticking out of the ground in the middle of the road. He walked over to it and dug it out of the earth so that it would not trip anyone else. It was a splendid rock, almost perfectly round and smooth. The stranger liked the rock, so rather than throw it away, he put it in his saddle bag, climbed up on his horse, and continued into the village.

As he rode past the first houses the village people stopped what they were doing 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 man?"

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 food 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 saddle bag, 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?" and 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 someone found a huge iron pot, and delivered it to the stranger in a wheel barrow. "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 for few minutes the stranger 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 as she ran towards her home. When she returned she was carrying 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 talked quietly, "A bit of beef and we can eat like rich people", they whispered. They went home and soon returned not only with beef and potatoes, but also milk, onions and barley too.

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

After everyone had eaten their fill, some folk brought out their fiddles. Everyone began to sing and dance - and they continued till the wee hours of the morning. Never had the village people had such a wonderful party.

The next morning the whole village 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 a gift of gratitude for your hospitality," he said. "Remember, as long as you make stone soup, you will never have to worry about being hungry."

As the stranger rode off, a grandfather put his arm around the shoulders of his young granddaughter and asked her, "Do you remember the other bit of magic that the stranger promised when you make stone soup?"

"Yes," she said, "the stone brings people closer together."

Today on this Thanksgiving Sunday, we celebrate the goodness of our God who provides us the bounty of earth, sea, and sky. The goodness of God who shares with us a profound love and calls us to share it. It's the time of year when we really do concentrate on trying to live in an attitude of gratitude – and that's a wonderful thing. But, how do we come to live in that same attitude of gratitude every day, all year long, regardless of the season, for we know the goodness of God always surrounds us. But maybe we miss it!

I'm thinking the Stone Soup story can help us answer that question - I know I hear something different each time I hear it - what about you?

Of course, the story is about sharing and caring when blessings seem scarce. The stone brings people together – feeds those who are hungry – and not just physical hunger, but spiritual hunger too – didn't it bring hope and even joy to a people worn down and worn out by fear of the future.

And it reminds us that everyone has some gift or contribution they can make for the betterment of all. The joy and hope are contagious for the townspeople, aren't they - as they came together and shared what they had, no matter how small their contribution, great things happened and they were led to rejoice!

We here in this church are indeed blessed – oh yes, some may have more than others but each one of us has something we can share - some way we can offer God's healing touch. Some way we can all come together and

add to the pot that feeds all who hunger for food and drink and warmth and love. And we do this in many ways, don't we. Some teach Sunday School. Some spend hours working on any one of our committees. Some knit prayer shawls. Some provide our fellowship hour every week. Some gift us with their musical talents each week. Some faithfully bring food donations each week for the Pantry. Some work in our gardens, keep the boiler running, keep the bathrooms clean. And each week we bring our financial offerings for God's work here and around the world. Our communion offering this month provides Shop Rite gift cards for clients of the Family Service Bureau to supplement their Thanksgiving dinners. We have our own version of Stone Soup happening – without the pot or the stone and that is a hopeful and joyful thing.

But Thanksgiving is about more than sharing and giving thanks – it is about trust and faith. The trust that God will provide all we need day by day and the faith to live as God as directed us to live no matter what our circumstances may be.

Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. All these things will be given unto you.

I love this passage from Matthew – the beauty of the images sticks with me – the simplicity of the teaching never fails to challenge me. Do not worry. Do not worry about your life. Can any of us by worrying add a single hour to our span of life? But we still do it. All of us. Young and old.

It's hard, I think, for us out of our reasonably comfortable lives, to really internalize and live out this passage: Don't worry. And it's hard for us to live into the promises of Joel: be not afraid! Be glad and rejoice. Surely the Lord has done great things. You will praise the name of the Lord your God!

How much we want to say these words, feel these words, deep from within. Especially these days: worries about the state of our world, mourning the loss of loved ones, fearful of the future. And we hear: seek ye first the kingdom of God. First. How hard that is for us.

Have you ever heard the expression, you never know that God is all you need until God is all you have. And what does all this have to do with the Stone Soup story.

I'll never forget an especially profound Bread for the Journey session – about 15 women from Integrity House participated. Many of you know what Integrity House is – it's a drug/alcohol rehabilitation center headquartered in Newark offering a new way of living for addicts – it's terribly hard work, but Integrity offers fresh hope. Some of the people are self admitted, some mandated by Drug Court, others have been incarcerated

and are at Integrity as a condition of their parole. They are all in various stages of recovery – in the fight of their lives. A world we can only begin to imagine if we haven't been there.

Now, it's always a deeply moving, profound, uplifting, even a sacred experience to spend two hours with these women in a session. But this one was probably the most intense I ever experienced in my 15 years of working with the women. It was a smaller than usual group - two of the women had been there for less than 3 days, most of them had never been involved in these gatherings before so they had no idea what to expect. They sat around the table, arms folded tight, not making eye contact, heads down – one of them even sat at the end of the table and turned her back on the group. We did introductions, I read a meditation, asked what grabbed you – and waited for responses. It was dreadfully quiet and I thought, this is going to be a looonnng two hours. Finally one of the repeat attendees spoke up. And then another. And then another. But it was still too quiet – the woman had not turned toward the group in spite of her friends encouraging her to do so. And I'm here to tell you, they don't mince words. That's part of the therapeutic community – to hold each other accountable and not let anyone hide for long inside themselves. Because that's what the drug of choice does – let's them hide. So the women don't waste words in trying to draw their sisters out.

I'm not sure when or why or how it happened, but they began to talk – really talk. I stayed quiet as we heard about suicide attempts, about suicidal and homicidal tendencies, about relapses, about losing their children, about being in jail, living on the streets – they went on and on sharing their struggles and their determination to be free of the demon addiction.

All of a sudden I realized that I was hearing one of the most deeply theological discussions I'd ever heard – shame, guilt, the need for forgiveness, the need for healing. It was then that I spoke up and said, now I'm going to talk like a minister. Each of these women had been through the second step of recovery – to turn your life over to a higher power – and for all of them it was God. So I talked about the promises of God, the grace of God, the fact that when we truly repent we are forgiven. Repentance: saying I'm sorry and I won't do it again. Over and over again we are forgiven. I realized then that the arms were unfolding, they were looking up, making eye contact; even the woman at the end of the table had turned around and was leaning in to the group. The questions came fast and hard – how many times are we forgiven. Forty times forty. How can God love me. Because you and all of us are created in God's image and that's good. But I've messed up so bad. So did Adam and Eve, so do all of us. Forgiveness

and reconciliation and love are here for us. There was a lot of confession going on there in that room and they hurt for the good news of God's forgiveness. They hurt from the holes in their souls and hearing these words of the assurance of forgiveness – brothers and sisters believe the good news: in Christ, we are forgiven. Thanks be to God! It was then that eyes watered up, the smiles began, and you could feel the hope and the joy growing in the room. What incredible, stunning moments those were.

You never know that God is all you need until God is all you have. The words of the passages from Joel and Matthew really meant something to these women in a way I'd never experienced. And you know, each of these women brought their own ingredients for the Stone Soup and we had the most delicious, life sustaining, transforming meal we ever had during Bread for the Journey. And all I could do was say, thank you God.

We ended the session with prayer – they offered their own prayers in the circle. Truly, we were in the presence of God and the Holy Spirit was at work. It was awesome in every sense of the word – all of us knew that something very profound and so freeing had happened in our time together.

We're all in recovery of some kind – we all have addictions, perhaps not to hard drugs including alcohol – but to more insidious things: power, money, status, prestige, to our calendars, to activity, to the way things always have been – things that we can hide behind. And, like those women, we're all hungry for the strength, the grace of God's eternal love. What do you have to give up in the fight of your life? And what will you contribute to the Stone Soup of that life sustaining and transforming meal? What will you contribute to the Stone Soup we're making here at St. Paul's? There is no small contribution – we're called together here to create something wonderful, to the glory of God.

Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. And all these things shall be given unto you. Surely the Lord has done great things – and is doing great things and will continue to do great things! In our lives and in our life together in ministry here at St. Paul's. Let's be glad and rejoice. God calls us to live in an attitude of gratitude - in spite of everything going on around us. May we have the eyes to see, the ears to hear, and the mouths to proclaim the good news of God's abundant and extravagant welcome and love for each of us. The stone indeed brings us closer together. Thanks be to God! Amen.