

St. Paul's Congregational Church  
 Deut. 8: 7 – 18; Matthew 25:14-30  
 November 19, 2017 Proper 28A. Thanksgiving Sunday  
 Rev. Cynthia Reynolds

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Over the years I've come to realize that touching the wondrous mystery of who God is and what God does can be both difficult - and sometimes deceptively easy – maybe we overthink it. Anyway, words aren't always helpful – but often stories, especially children's stories lead us in profound ways. So, here's a story for us all, appropriate for the season of gratitude:

Once upon a time there was a great famine upon the land. Three soldiers, hungry and weary of battle, came upon a small impoverished village. The villagers, suffering a meager harvest and fatigued too from the many years of war, saw the three soldiers come near them. Quickly they hid from sight what little they had to eat and when the soldiers came to the village square they told them, "There's not a bite to eat in the whole town. You'd better just keep moving on to the next village."

"Oh, but we have everything we need," one soldier said. "In fact, we were thinking of making some stone soup to share with all of you. You, sir, look hungry. Would you like some?"

"Stone soup! What a ridiculous thing!" the villagers exclaimed. "You can't make soup from a stone!"

But the three soldiers reached into their pockets, and each of them in turn slowly pulled out a smooth, round stone. "We have brought with us some wonderful stones that should make for a great and hearty soup. Do you have a large cauldron we might borrow to make our stone soup?"

Overcome with hunger and unable to feed the guests staying at his inn, the local innkeeper was intrigued with the idea of making soup from stones. With help from the soldiers, he pulled a large cauldron from the kitchen, placed it in the center of the square, and the three soldiers filled it with water and built a roaring fire under it.

Then with great ceremony, the three soldiers took the three stones they had collected on their travels, and placed them into the water, carefully, one at a time. They waited for their soup to come to a boil, stirring occasionally with a long wooden spoon.

"Do you know what would really help this soup?" asked one of the soldiers. "A hefty dash of salt and pepper! After all, you can't have a good stone soup without salt and pepper."

One of the villagers took a breath and said quietly, "Well, I think I might be able to find some salt and pepper that you might have – if I can share in your stone soup."

"Of course! There will be plenty of soup to go around, with such a large cauldron boiling."

By now, hearing the rumor of food, most of the villagers had come to the square or were watching the events attentively from their windows. As the soldiers so very

carefully stirred and sniffed at the broth, the people found their mouths watering. Their hunger began to ease their initial skepticism.

“Ah,” one of the soldiers said rather loudly, “I do like a tasty stone soup – of course stone soup with cabbage is hard to beat.”

After a few moments, a villager approached hesitantly – holding a cabbage he’d retrieved from its hiding place and added it to the pot.

Another villager quietly came forward, “You know, I have some carrots. That would really add flavor and color to this soup too!” He ran off to his home to fetch the carrots.

The third soldier was stirring the soup – “Yes, this will be a fine soup. But a pinch of parsley would really make it soup fit for a king!”

A woman jumped up from her seat, “What luck! I just remembered where there is some parsley!” Off she ran and returned with an apron full of parsley and a turnip.

As the kettle boiled on, the memory of the villagers improved: they remembered they had barley, salted beef, and rich cream – and all of this was added to the soup. Finally, the entire village sat down to a great feast – they ate and danced into the night, refreshed by the feast and delighting in their new found friends.

In the morning, the three soldiers awoke to find the entire village standing before them. At their feet lay a satchel filled with the village’s best breads and cheeses.

An elder told them, “You have given us the greatest of gifts: the secret of how to make soup from stones. Rest assured this is something that we shall never forget and that we shall forever cherish.

The third soldier turned to the crowd and said, “Whereas there may be no real secret to stone soup, one thing is certain: it takes many and all to make a great feast.” And with this, the soldiers kindly accepted the gift from the villagers and went on their way, never to return.

It is said that soon after meeting these soldiers, the village quickly returned to its former prosperity and has thrived ever since. The soldiers are said to still walk from town to town collecting stones along the way, and sharing their secret recipe for stone soup.

Like many of you, I’ve heard this story many times before – in fact, I used it this week with my women’s group from Integrity – generated deep and wonderful conversation with the women.

But there’s more – can you imagine this a story about the church? About church at its best? It has hints of the Parable of the Talents that we read this morning – about sharing or not sharing the strength and the gifts we’ve been given by God. About the ministry of the whole people of God, about supporting this ministry here and now. A story about stewardship, about Thanksgiving, about faith – all rolled into one!

The villagers were afraid. They were hanging on to whatever they have – they were hiding themselves away - worried about tomorrow. We know that fear, that anxiety too, don’t we. The past several years have been challenging for our church. We haven’t had a solid net positive budget in many years – we remember the good old days when our pews were filled each week, when the Sunday School classes were bursting, pledges are slow to come in, our committees are smaller, our boiler is old!

What’s under all this? Fear. And what’s the opposite of fear: faith! A faith that God will indeed provide what we need – that worry does nothing but give us upset

stomachs and sleepless nights. I've heard that here – that fear – our copier broke and we're trying to decide how to replace it – a three year lease has been a real concern for some folks on the council – are we sure we'll still be here in three years?

But there has also been opportunity these days as well – to get our priorities straight, to figure out what's really important in our ministry. Most of the VBS children were not from church families. We are embarking on a whole new outreach here – temporarily housing the Food Bank for the Nutley Family Service Bureau and that's exciting! We'll continue to get requests from families served by NFSB for Christmas gifts – we won't find asks for computers, the latest electronic gadgets – instead it's pajamas, warm coats, boots – gift cards to local supermarkets. Makes me remember back in Glen Ridge when we were decorating a Star Tree, one of the 8<sup>th</sup> graders stopped as he was putting stars on the tree and stood back a minute – and said thoughtfully, “And I want a new computer for Christmas – the one I have works just fine – these kids are asking for warm clothes. And here's a request for a tool box for a dad – my father has two of them, one he's never used. I'm bringing that in.”

A quiet moment of new awareness for this young man – a gift to him and to the other confirmands who were there. That led to real participation in serving at this local soup kitchen – a mile and a half from my home. And they've learned indeed that the opposite of fear is faith – our brothers and sisters at that church ooze their faith – and it's contagious – the children and youth began nagging their parents to keep the grocery cart in the back of the sanctuary filled to share with our new friends. The villagers begin to come out of their homes to participate in their community – church – and create abundance for all. So have the children and youth in Glen Ridge, so have we at St. Paul's.

In these anxious days we in the church have good news to tell, to share. It's up to us to model that for everyone we meet, wherever God calls us to live our lives – seems to me that as the villagers came out of their homes, brought their gifts out of hiding, others watching were moved to do the same. Can't that be true for us in our churches?

Isn't that church working to be at its best, the church in ministry at its best? All people coming forth giving of their time, talent, and treasure? The opposite of fear is faith. The villagers learned that – and we're told the community found a new prosperity, thriving into the future. Isn't that the good news we have come to know through our faith – why wouldn't we want to share that, model that, tell about it. Sure, all this is countercultural and sometimes it's awfully hard but we have to start somewhere. Members and friends of this church – it's up to us. The opposite of fear is faith. And faith can move mountains.

Now, let's talk a little about leadership: not one but three leaders walked into the village. They were hungry and tired. The villagers were hungry and tired. Now, there are those among us who might smile a bit at the manipulation these soldiers used to call forth the makings of the stone soup – maybe a little like white washing that fence we read about in Tom Sawyer. But let's look a little deeper at the leadership they displayed.

First of all, they weren't anxious – they knew they could create a feast for all, that the means were available, regardless of what the villagers told them. The stones they offered were anything but expected food – and maybe that's a lesson for us all too – haven't we all found the answer to a dilemma right in front of us in a most unexpected or even a most ordinary event? I've always believed that's where God works – in the

ordinary, in the unexpected. We just have to be alert enough, brave enough, faithful enough to recognize it and to act.

And the non anxious presence of the soldiers gave the villagers a sense of trust or at least a curiosity, an openness to see what they had to offer. And isn't that what we're called to be about: being willing to offer the gifts that we've received through God's grace that others want to know more, that others want to participate, using the gifts they've been given? Remember that line in the story: "their hunger began to ease their initial skepticism."

People are hungry today! Not just for food for their bodies, but hungry to fill the emptiness in their hearts, in their souls. Money doesn't do it – things don't - our drugs of choice don't. Only the eternal loving presence of God does. Only God doesn't change. Only God can bring us to the peace and wholeness we yearn for – and that's what God wants for each of us. Living that belief out, living out that promise, leading others to that faith – that's our sacred call. Church leaders, members, friends, clergy, that's our call.

Sermons, deciding which copier to get, committee meetings – that's all part of leading a church of course – but empowering the ministry of the whole people of God – that's what we're about. It's not only what we say that makes a difference in the lives of others – but how we live out our call, how we model the faith that we feel so deeply within ourselves – how we can be a non anxious presence in the lives of our brothers and sisters in faith, sure that we're never alone, certain that God is working in and through us, open to the wondrous surprises and grace that God holds for us.

And when a community lives that out together, supporting each other in the hard times, rejoicing together in the good times, we get a glimpse of what the realm of God can look like with all the promise that holds when people come together and share the gifts they have been given. And that's awesome.

That's what those soldiers did, isn't it – and with no more than a stone. How cool is that! What did they do then? They went out and continued to share the secret of the stone soup – that's evangelism, my friends.

Friends, may you, may we as church, find many smooth stones, and use our God given talents to empower others to create the best soup ever! So may it be! Amen!