

“Stone Soup”

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2 Kings 4:38-44

John 6:1-21

When Elisha returned to Gilgal, there was a famine in the land.

*A group of prophets was sitting before him. He said to his servant,
“Put on the big pot and cook some stew for the prophets.”*

2 Kings 4:38

Let us pray... O God,

Help us as a church to cook up a good stew that is spiritually nourishing
by the way we do worship on Sunday, maintain and care for our sacred space,
manage our resources, greet friend and stranger alike,
perform our mission in our community and the world,
and show forth the possibilities of your Kingdom in our time.

Amen

From our Hebrew Scripture lesson today, it would seem that the Prophet Elisha
had a little trouble with the stew, but he knew just what to do.

So, he just added a little flour and, ‘Voila!’

Johanna & I were watching one of these cooking contest shows on TV
where 4 professional chefs compete with each other to prepare a meal
that will meet the standards of a panel of culinary experts

As is the custom of such reality shows, someone is dropped each round
in a kind of Darwinian survival of the fittest.

These are timed events where they are given obscure ingredients
and a fully stocked kitchen with all kinds of utensils and appliances
and they must prepare a dish for each judge.

There was a situation where one of the contestants realized his concoction
was too thin and he knew to remedy the situation by adding something –
like Elisha adding flour to his stew.

It was brilliant and this fellow stayed cool under pressure
as he served up four dishes for each of the judges right on time –
but he still got cut!

Needless to say, the world can be pretty harsh in its judgment
of what each of us is challenged to make of our day.

These shows are admittedly presented as competitions
and frequently even the judges admit they are reluctant
to choose between chefs who do demonstrate their excellence.

Not all of life is about being the best – sometimes it is just about being enough...
Sometimes it is about just sharing what you have.

Willard, p.2

I love the story of “Stone Soup” that Jan Schmeichel served up for us today and about how that wonderful parable can actually happen.

There are different versions of this folktale which tell about soldiers returning from a war, or a hobo just trying to bum a meal. Depending on the version, there are a variety of life lessons to be learned from this trickery of boiling a stone in a pot of water, like:

getting a fearful community to trust again,
or teaching generosity for those who have enough and could share,
or humility for those who would otherwise be greedy,
or ingenuity for a poor person to get a hot meal through humor.

But what I find so hopeful and helpful in this story is the rediscovery of the practical dynamics of community.

This also gives us some insight as to how Jesus’ could have fed 5,000 people...

The feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle that is reported in each of the gospels, and in the Gospel of John’s version, we get a closer view of what happened.

First, there was recognition of the need – dinner-time with a crowd of thousands there and Jesus asked a question giving the disciples a chance to think of what to do about it – even though they couldn’t visualize it initially.

Second, one of the disciples found a child who was willing to share his food – apparently all of five barley loaves and two fish.

Third, Jesus gave the disciples a job to do – prepare the crowd by getting them to sit down, and anticipate something was going to happen.

Then, Jesus prayed – and did it in such a way that people would remember that place because of his prayer of thanksgiving, as well as what happened next...

He distributed the five loaves of bread and two fish which became “multiplied” into twelve baskets of left over pieces.

In my opinion, the real miracle is that everybody ate and had enough – Oh, and nobody complained about the menu!

A willingness to share – that is one of the main ingredients of true Christian community.

Was it inspired by asking the question and visualizing the possibility?

Was it by asking around to see if someone would share?

Was it in preparing the crowd by making them comfortable and then praying a beautiful prayer?

Was it actually a miracle where God caused the material of bread and fish to be supernaturally replicated – or did they just share what they had brought with them, but packed away?

Willard, p.3

Sharing our gifts – and encouraging others to share their gifts
is the key ingredient for Christian community.

I am so proud to see that quality of Christian community at work in our church
as well as our denomination.

Four years ago, when Geoffrey Black took office as the General Minister of
the United Church of Christ, he called for an effort to help fight hunger.

The “Mission: 1 campaign to take a bite out of hunger”

began on November 1st, 2011 asking all UCC churches
to collect more than 1 million items of food for local food banks,
to receive \$111,111 in donations for East African famine relief,
and to write 11,111 letters to our Congress asking them to
advocate hunger-related causes throughout the world.

<http://www.ucc.org/big-goal-drives-florida-ucc>

As of February 2012, the all-church totals, which are still being tallied, were:

1,462,949 food items donated to local food banks

37,731 letters written to Congress

\$187,013 in cash for local food banks and Neighbors In Need

\$183,262 in cash for famine relief in East Africa

<http://www.chhsm.org/news/2012/03/08/uccs-mission-1-inspired-chhsm-action-relationship.365956>

One of the ways that UCC churches raised funds and collected food for Mission: 1
was to hold CROP Walks – which are like the March of Dimes,
where donors pledge to volunteers for the miles they walk
on a planned route.

CROP Walks have been around a long time, sponsored by Church World Service
which works closely with the United Church of Christ
especially in responding to natural disasters.

<http://www.ucc.org/ucc-churches-using-crop-walk>

There used to be a CROP Walk held here in The Villages area,
which discontinued a couple years ago, but could certainly be revived
as a viable and effective mission charity.

Like stone soup, CROP Walks succeed by everyone bringing
even just a little bit of something to the table.

As we identify issues like hunger and poverty, violence, and pollution –
issues we cannot escape, then even diverse people ought to be able
to find common ground that transcends political and religious beliefs,
to do something about it.

Unfortunately, our society and the world are at an impasse in these areas –
especially as extremists on all sides manage to control the conversation.

But those real needs are where God already is and where Christianity came from,
though the Church has not always been aligned with such practical concerns
and is often part of the obstruction.

Willard, p.4

Some have been content for the Church to be limited to the debate about abortion and gender issues, yet without a clear mandate against racism, war, poverty, and pollution.

However, more and more the Church is being pushed in that direction to raise questions, seek alliances, and work towards a better world.

Christianity reminds us of the Human dimension of God – not just to moralize about human sinfulness, but to help one another in our weaknesses, while holding forth the achievable examples of Jesus Christ the Son of God and Son of Man.

That Human dimension of God through Christ does not mean that we can ever achieve perfection like God, but that we are to recognize that our wild diversity and variety as human beings is a perfect reflection of God's Creation.

We are all part of the stew – so to speak, as necessary ingredients for the recipe to pull together.

If a spice gets left out, the whole dish falls flat – everyone is important to make it work, everyone has something to bring to the table.

In Psalm 34:8. the Psalmist says, "Taste and see that the LORD is good", and Jesus said, "You are the salt of the Earth";

And if he had heard the story of "Stone Soup", he would very likely have added,

"You are the potatoes and carrots, the onions and celery.

You are the beef and the burgundy and the bread and the cheese."

What if we sought ways through simple hospitality – like sharing a meal, as a strategy for overcoming the world's hostility.

What if?

Amen

*Our first lesson is 2 Kings 4:38-44 from the Common English Translation.
It is a story that is rarely heard about how the Prophet Elisha
performed a miracle similar to Jesus feeding the 5,000...*

- [38] When Elisha returned to Gilgal, there was a famine in the land.
A group of prophets was sitting before him. He said to his servant,
“Put on the big pot and cook some stew for the prophets.”
- [39] So one of them went out to the field to gather plants;
he found a wild vine and gathered wild gourds from it, filling his garment.
He came and cut them up into the pot of stew,
but no one knew what they were.
- [40] The stew was served to the men, but as they started to eat it,
they cried out and said,
“There is death in that pot, man of God!”
They couldn’t eat it.
- [41] Elisha said,
“Get some flour.”
He threw it into the pot and said,
“Serve the people so they can eat.”
At that point, there was nothing bad left in the pot.
- [42] A man came from Baal-shalishah [Bay’-all shall’-ee- shaw] ,
bringing the man of God some bread from the early produce—
twenty loaves of barley bread and fresh grain from his bag. Elisha said,
“Give it to the people so they can eat.”
- [43] His servant said,
“How can I feed one hundred men with this?”
Elisha said,
“Give it to the people so they can eat! This is what the Lord says:
‘Eat and there will be leftovers.’”
- [44] So the servant gave the food to them.
They ate and had leftovers, in agreement with the Lord’s word.

Let us be guided and challenged by these words...

John 6:1-21

- [1] After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee,
which is the Sea of Tibe'ri-as.
- [2] And a multitude followed him,
because they saw the signs which he did on those who were diseased.
- [3] Jesus went up on the mountain,
and there sat down with his disciples.
- [4] Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand.
- [5] Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a multitude was coming to him,
Jesus said to Philip,
“How are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?”
- [6] This he said to test him, for he himself knew what he would do.
- [7] Philip answered him,
“Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread
for each of them to get a little.”
- [8] One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him,
[9] “There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish;
but what are they among so many?”
- [10] Jesus said,
“Make the people sit down.”
- Now there was much grass in the place;
so the men sat down, in number about five thousand.
- [11] Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks,
he distributed them to those who were seated;
so also the fish, as much as they wanted.
- [12] And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples,
“Gather up the fragments left over, that nothing may be lost.”
- [13] So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments
from the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten.
- [14] When the people saw the sign which he had done, they said,
“This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!”
- [15] Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force
to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.
- [16] When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea,
[17] got into a boat, and started across the sea to Caper'na-um.
It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.
- [18] The sea rose because a strong wind was blowing.
[19] When they had rowed about three or four miles,
they saw Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near to the boat.
They were frightened,
[20] but he said to them,
“It is I; do not be afraid.”
- [21] Then they were glad to take him into the boat,
and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.