

Glen Ridge Congregational Church  
November 22, 2009  
Stone Soup  
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.

A couple of weeks ago Tyra Brown and her group of volunteers decided to provide a thanksgiving meal with all the trimmings for the Bread for the Journey women – so when I looked for an opening to our group time I remembered that great Thanksgiving story – Stone Soup. It led to profound conversation – this group of women works so well with stories like this – we never know where the group time will go but it's always a wonderful discussion – for them and for me as well. It's one of the things I do that I enjoy the most and feeds me, grounds me, and inspires me every month!

So what better story than this one for us as we approach the Thanksgiving holiday this week. There are many versions of it around for sure but this one goes like this – as you listen, pay attention to what most strikes you:

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 some brought milk, onions and barley too.

By the time the soup was ready it was almost dark. It was the most delicious soup that they had 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 full, 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 said, "Do you remember the other bit of magic that the stranger promised when you make stone soup?" he asked.

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

Today on this Thanksgiving Sunday, we take time out to specially 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; we are much more aware of the need of Food Pantries and act on that awareness – forgetting too often, I'm afraid, that people are hungry in the summer too. From now until a few days after Christmas many food banks are overfilled – the one in my home church is asking for temporary loans of extra shelving which will be returned to the owners in January. But it's a start for sure and that's a good thing.

Back to the Stone Soup story – what did you hear in it? What lessons did you take from it? I know my own engagement in the story has changed since my childhood. What about you?

Of course, the story is about sharing and caring when blessings seem scarce. The stone brings people closer together – and feeds those who are hungry. It reminds us that everyone, no matter how poor they may seem, has some gift or contribution they can make for the betterment of all. We are indeed stronger together than apart. And whatever gifts we are given, we are called to give thanks. It doesn't matter how small the gift seems, it's worth gratitude.

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. Feed all who hunger for the presence of God in their lives. And we do this in many ways, don't we. Some teach Sunday School. Some spend hours working on any one of our ministries. Some go to Habitat for Humanity to work. Some serve in South Africa. Some sing in the choir, play handbells. Some enrich their own prayer life in Bible study classes. Each week we bring our financial offerings for God's work here and around the world. And today we take a special offering to benefit Goodwill Rescue Mission – a beacon of light and hope for so many of our brothers and sisters caught in a mire of hopelessness and poverty. We have our own version of Stone Soup happening, don't we - and that is good.

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 calls us to no matter what our circumstances may be.

Trust and faith: sounds simple, doesn't it. But we know better. I love this passage from Matthew – the beauty of the images sticks with me – and the simplicity of the teaching never fails to challenge me. Do not worry. That's the one I have trouble with – even though it does nothing to solve the current problem, the current difficulty. We all do it – I know we do.

Maybe it's harder for us out of our abundance and reasonably comfortable lives, to really internalize and live out this passage. And I wonder if our fear of the future gets in the way too. And it's hard for us too, I think, to live into the promise: be not afraid! Be glad and rejoice. Surely the Lord has done great things. You will praise the name of the Lord your God!

This lesson became incredibly real to a large group from GRCC who gave up part of their weekend yesterday to help pack and distribute food bags for our neighbors in Bloomfield. A group of all ages – they spent hours yesterday serving over 300 people who waited in a line that stretched around the block to receive turkeys, food donations. Then they each received a bag lunch, lovingly prepared by volunteers, using some of the

food you have donated. And if this wasn't enough to touch our volunteers, Todd Travia reports that every time he asked someone, "How are you today" – the answer was: I am blessed because of all of you, this church, and the Lord! He says, it makes it all seem so easy – and when I sit down to my turkey, I will remember the 300 new friends Carter and I made today.

Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. All these things will be given unto you. What a stone soup our brothers and sisters in Christ made yesterday!

And we created an awesome stone soup through our sharing at the Bread for the Journey gathering – a combination of women who had been at Integrity for just a few days to one who was finishing the program in a week – I'm always touched by their openness, their willingness to share their joys and struggles – and how they surround each other with help, with listening, with confrontation when necessary – they don't mince words – and that's part of the therapeutic community, and maybe that's part of being church at its best too – to hold each other accountable and not let anyone hide too long inside themselves. Because that's what their drug of choice has done – it has let them hide. So the women don't waste words in trying to draw their sisters out of themselves.

And then it hit me - like those townspeople who hid away in their homes in fear, held on to their meager ingredients for the soup, maybe we need to be drawn out of ourselves too. Maybe we need to stop hiding.

We're all in recovery of some kind – we all have addictions, perhaps not to the hard drugs – but to the more insidious things: power, money, status, prestige, fear and anxiety, to our calendars, to activity, to the way things always have been – what's your drug of choice? What do you have to give up in the fight of your life?

And what will you contribute to this great soup we create together as we call each other out and surround each other with help and hope.

I'm sure the passage from Matthew takes on new meaning when we think of our neighbors both in Bloomfield and our sisters and brothers of Integrity House. And when we have the opportunity to be drawn out of ourselves and be surrounded by a faith that will sustain us every moment of our lives.

This will change us – our perspective, our grounding – we will realize that no matter what we are indeed blessed. And it's contagious too – we want to share that gift of faith and trust with all we meet. That's what church at its best is all about – sharing our faith by word and action – caring for each other – friends, that's called evangelism. And that's what Jesus tells us to do.

Ask the women who prepare, serve, and eat together with the women of Integrity. And ask those folks who served in Bloomfield yesterday about being surrounded by help and hope. And joy. A joy that passes all understanding. A joy of living in an attitude of gratitude to God that God will provide for all of our needs. A freedom based on trust and faith that God indeed will provide.

Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. And all these things shall be given unto you. Be glad and rejoice. Surely the Lord has done great things – and is doing great things. 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 love and welcome to each of us. The stone indeed brings us closer together. Amen.

Let us pray: gracious God, how rich and beautiful is the world you have made. Help us to trust in you so that we will stop worrying and share freely with others, knowing that your grace will never run out, that your forgiveness is available to all of us, that your riches will never end. Bless us as we go forth to share your good news. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.