



God in Ordinary Time
Today: The Life of Compassion

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

an Inclusive Community of Faith and Action

July 31, 2011

“The Life of Compassion”

Isaiah 55:1-5, Mark 6:30-44

Rev. Jamie Norwich McLennan

Once upon a time, two women were wandering the roads of the mid-west. They came upon a small town in the middle of Nebraska. When they entered the center of town, people began to gather their children around them and bring them into their homes. There were suspicious eyes everywhere. Times were hard and strangers were not trusted.

The two women went to the park and sat down on a rock near a firepit. They began to gather wood for a fire and one of the women unpacked a large pot that she filled with water. The mayor of the town had been called out to talk to the women who looked too much like they were getting ready to settle in.

“What’s your business here?” the Mayor asked the two women.

“We’re just looking for a place to stay the night and fix us up a little bit of supper,” one of the women answered.

“There’s no food to be had here,” the mayor quickly answered. “The crops were hailed out and we have nothing left.”

The woman went on as though she hadn’t heard the mayor. “In fact, we were thinking that we might just whip up a batch of stone soup to share with all of you.”

“We have nothing!” the mayor repeated.

“Oh we have everything we need,” the other woman said, pulling out an ordinary stone from a fine cloth bag.

By now, others in town were beginning to get curious. There were rumors of food when the cooking pot was put on the fire, so they began to overcome their fear and come by. The women began talking to one another in voices that were loud enough to be heard by the people who were stopping by.

“I love a tasty stone soup!” one woman said.

“Yes,” agreed the other. “But a stone soup with an onion. . .why, that’s even better yet!”

The two stirred the pot of water over the fire, and shortly a little boy came wandering up. “I found this old onion in the back of the storm shelter. You can have it for that old stone soup you are making.” After handing the women the onion, the boy raced off, and one of the women took out a chopping board and knife and began to chop the onion.

“Wonderful,” said the other woman, stirring the soup with great delight. “Stone soup with an onion! How wonderful that will taste.” The women laughed and talked, and the smell of the onion boiling in the water began to bring others by.

“As much as I like onions in my stone soup, I think the best stone soup I ever had was the time we added a carrot or two.” The other woman nodded her agreement, and before they could say too much more, a carrot appeared. . .and to their surprise, a few green beans as well!

The crowd around the women was growing and people were looking over their shoulders to see the stone soup. And as the people came, they brought other produce as well; potatoes and zucchini, a tomato to add to the broth, and fresh rosemary and bay and thyme. The crowd began to tell stories and the children ran and played while the soup simmered on.

Bowls were brought out and soup ladled in and the town shared a delicious meal in the park. When all the soup was finished and the only thing left was the stone, the mayor offered the women a great deal of money for the stone. . .but they refused to sell and travelled on the next day.

As the women left the town, they ran into a group of children standing near the road. The women found the little boy who had brought them the onion the day before, and they gave him the stone. They whispered to the group, “It was not the stone that provided the miracle of dinner the day before. . .it was the people in the town themselves.” And with that word, the women left the town behind.

What a delightful story! And by the time we get to the end of the story, we understand something more about people and communities. When people are feeling afraid, or when times are difficult, we tend to isolate ourselves. We tend to “look out for our own,” rather than looking out into the world to see who else might be there. When we are isolated, we think that

the world consists of only the things that we have before us and within our homes. We forget that in joining together, we can often create something more.

Jesus' disciples found themselves in just such a situation. They had been working hard helping Jesus in his work of caring for the sick and the poor, and they were tired. Jesus had suggested that they all get away for a little bit of "R and R"—rest and reflection. But instead of being able to get away, the crowd had followed them. . . and Jesus had taught them. . . and now it was the end of the day and the disciples just wanted everybody to go home so that they could get a little bit of that promised rest.

But it was not to be. When the disciples suggested to Jesus that he send the folks away so that they could get something to eat, Jesus puts that job right back on their plates as well. "You give them some food," he tells them. "You want us to spend all that money to feed these people?" they ask him. "No," Jesus says. "Do it this way; how many loaves do you have?"

The disciples went and looked in their things and found that they had 5 loaves and 2 fish. I can imagine that they held it out for Jesus, thinking themselves vindicated; how could they possibly be expected to feed the multitudes with such a paltry lunch? Jesus, though, doesn't seem to get the message.

He has the disciples get the people to sit down on the grass in groups of 100 or 50. Of course, that would take some time. So, while everybody is being broken into these smaller groups, people begin to talk to one another. People notice that they have friends and neighbors—maybe even family in the crowd and they move together. While they chat about what they have already seen and heard, they keep an eye on Jesus and the disciples.

When everybody is in "human-size" groups, and the disciples are back up front, Jesus takes the food that the disciples have gathered; he holds up the food in blessing and then breaks it up among the disciples. They, in turn begin to share with some of the people in the closest groups. People realize that it is, indeed, a time for supper so they bring out the various snacks that they had with them and began to share with those around them. Some had figs. . . some had cheese. . . almost all had a bit of bread to add to the meal.

While they are sharing the meal, they share the stories of their lives as well. They talk about what brought them to listen to Jesus. . . the difficult situations they have found themselves in and why they feel hopeless. They talk about what Jesus has been teaching them and how his words have encouraged them. All are fed—both body and soul.

Jesus did not do magic; he turned down those sorts of opportunities when he was tempted in the desert and refused to turn stones into bread. He taught that humankind does not live by bread alone. We are also fed by our love of God and our love of one another. When we forget that, we tend to pull inside ourselves and hoard our love. . . our time. . . our money. . . our food. . . our very selves. Jesus does not begin in that place of fear and hoarding; instead, he begins in a place of abundance. There is enough for all. That is the God in whom Jesus believes—the God proclaimed in the Isaiah passage we read for today.

Whatever else Jesus taught that day, he now begins to teach about abundance and community by moving people into face-to-face groups. These smaller groups allow people to see one another as individuals, rather than as a large mass of people all clamoring for Jesus' attention. Parker Palmer states that this "very experience of community is itself an experience of abundance," and that "True abundance resides in the simple experience of people being present to one another and for one another." (p. 130).

I think that we—in this country—have been acting much as the crowd of 5000 people. We see so many people and we begin to think of scarce resources rather than abundance. We begin to start reaching out for what I need. . . what my family needs. We forget the needs of others and the power of the community. Worse yet, the leaders in our government are thinking this way.

We have forgotten the power of community. We created government so that we would have a good way of sharing the abundance with which we have been blessed. We have forgotten the words of Jesus who told people they had cared for him when they had cared for the widows and orphans—the people the Bible calls "the least of these." We have forgotten the words of FDR that are on your bookmark for today: "In these days of difficulty, we Americans everywhere must choose a path of social justice, the path of faith, the path of hope, and the path of love toward our fellow man."

We need to get into human-sized face-to-face groups again and remember that the miracle of loaves and fishes is a lot more like stone soup and a pot-luck dinner than a gourmet feast thrown in our honor. As Parker Palmer puts it: "God can only act incarnationally through. . . created beings. . . Without our active cooperation, God's abundance always remains in the realm of potential." Let us all get out our stones and soup pots and create a community that cares for all. This is the Kingdom of Heaven, the Reign of God. Alleluia! Amen.