

*Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."*

Once upon a time, three soldiers trudged down a road in a strange country. They were on their way home from the wars. Besides being tired, they were hungry. In fact, they had eaten nothing for two days.

"How I would like a good dinner tonight," said the first. "And a bed to sleep in," added the second. "But that is impossible," said the third.

On they marched, until suddenly they saw the lights of a little village ahead of them, and their spirits lifted. "Maybe we'll find a bite to eat and a bed to sleep in," they thought.

But when they got there, they found the doors locked and the windows closed. After many years of war, the villagers feared strangers, they were short of food, and hoarded what they had. When they saw the soldiers coming, they hurried to hide their food. They hid the barley in haylofts, carrots under quilts, and buckets of milk down the wells. They hid all they had to eat. Then they waited.

The soldiers stopped at the first house. "Good evening to you," they said. "Could you spare a bit of food for three hungry soldiers?" "We have no food for ourselves," the residents said. "It has been a poor harvest."

The soldiers went to the next house. "Could you spare a bit of food?" they asked. "And do you have a corner where we could sleep for the night?" "Oh, no," the man said. "We gave all we could spare to the soldiers who came before you." "And our beds are full," said the woman.

At each house, the response was the same -- no one had food or a place for the soldiers to stay. The villagers had very good reasons, like feeding the sick and children. They stood in the street and sighed.

The soldiers spoke quietly among themselves and the first soldier then turned to the village elders. "Your tired fields have left you nothing to share, so we will share what little we have: the secret of how to make soup from stones."

The soldiers asked for a big iron pot, water to fill it, and a fire to heat it. Then they dropped three round, smooth stones into the pot.

"This is stone soup," the soldiers explained.

"Is that all you put in it?" asked the villagers. "Absolutely—although some say it tastes even better with a few carrots..." One woman said, "Why, I think I have a carrot or two!" She ran to get the carrots.

A couple of minutes later, the villagers again asked, "Is that it?"

"Well," said the second soldier, "any soup needs salt and pepper," So children ran to fetch salt and pepper.

"A good stone soup should have some cabbage, but no use asking for what we don't have!" said the third soldier. Another woman said, "I think I can probably find some cabbage," and off she scurried.

"If only we had a bit of beef and some potatoes, this soup would be fit for a rich man's table." The peasants thought it over, then ran to fetch what they had hidden in their cellars. A rich man's soup, and all from a few stones! It seemed like magic!

The soldiers said, "If only we had a bit of barley and some milk, this soup would be fit for a king!" And so the peasants managed to retrieve some barley and milk.

"The soup is ready," said the cooks, "and all will taste it, but first we need to set the tables." Tables and torches were set up in the square, and all sat down to eat. Some of the peasants said, "Such a great soup would be better with bread and cider," so they brought forth the last two items and the banquet was enjoyed by all.

They ate and danced and sang well into the night, refreshed by the feast and their new-found friends. The soldiers asked again if there was a loft where they might sleep for the night. "Oh, no!" said the town folk. "You wise men must have the best beds in the village!" So one soldier spent the night in the priest's house, one in the baker's house, and one in the mayor's house.

In the morning the three soldiers awoke to find the entire village standing before them. At their feet lay a satchel of the village's best breads and cheese. "You have given us the greatest of gifts: the secret of how to make soup from stones", said an elder, "and we shall never forget." The third soldier turned to the crowd, and said: "There is no secret, but this is certain: it is only by sharing that we may make a feast". And off the soldiers wandered, down the road.

Jesus is trying to get away into a lonely place to be by himself to process the news that his cousin and predecessor, John the Baptist, has been executed by Herod, and for no good reason. Herod is hosting a birthday banquet - as a noted theologian

points out, he's feeding those who have no lack of food - and decides to reward his step-daughter for her dancing by showing off to his guests. She can have anything she wants. So, at the urging of her mother, she asks for John's head on a platter. Herod's arrogance now comes back to haunt him - he has to go through with the execution because he made the promise boastfully and publicly. There is not the slightest hint of compassion in anyone in this story.

While Herod feeds the well-fed, Jesus provides food for the hungry. But unlike the time of Moses, where God feeds the people with no help from human beings, Jesus does not do the work - or take the glory - himself. When the disciples tell Jesus that the people are hungry, Jesus responds, "You feed them." They have seen the need, they have witnessed Jesus' compassion. Now, they are to step up and participate in his ministry. But, they are amazed and concerned. They have no resources to provide for such a huge crowd. So, as usual, Jesus simply asks them what resources they do have - and it doesn't amount to much. Some bread and fish. But, this is what Jesus uses. He blesses it and breaks it (surely a foreshadow of the Eucharist) and then he gives it back to the disciples for them to distribute.

Ever since that moment, people have tried to explain how that miracle worked. Did Jesus say, "Abracadabra!" and wave his hands over a couple of fish and a few pita breads, and 'poof!' they turned into an all-you-can-eat buffet? Did someone really run off to the local Publix to get some food from the deli, and Matthew neglected to tell us about it when he wrote his Gospel?

I guess either of those scenarios is possible, but probably unlikely. Perhaps, though, as many scholars have suggested over the years, the generosity of Jesus and the disciples simply opened the hearts of others in the crowd and they produced the food that they had brought with them and began to share it. Perhaps, in that deserted place, now filled with a crowd, everyone who was there was able to draw strength and consolation from being together, from looking to Jesus with hope and longing, and in sharing a meal together.

For me, this is no less a miracle than if the food was multiplied by magic! Not only does Jesus find the compassion in himself to meet the needs of the people in spite of his own grief and anxiety - which is the reason why he has gone out by himself in the first place - he changes the hearts of those who follow him so that they, too are willing to sacrifice and share in order to meet one another's need.

But to focus on the fact that there was more food than thousands of people could eat is to miss the big picture. The story is about the revelation of who Jesus is - that is, bread for the world. Better than manna from heaven. Always abundant and present in deserted places, when we are exhausted and are given the impossible task of feeding thousands. When we ourselves are hungry. (Margaret Watson)

We don't need to worry about scarcity, however. We, too, as Jesus' disciples, can find ourselves distributing whatever it is that those around us need, simply by being willing to show up, to sacrifice and to share what we have been given in such abundance. As Frederick Buechner said, "Greed is the mathematical truism that the more you get, the more you have. The opposite of greed - the selfless love of God and neighbor - is based on the truth that the more you give away in love, the more you are."

Like the story of Stone Soup, we know from our experience of the Eucharist, which is not a private meal, that it is instead that holy and ordinary moment when what is taken, blessed, broken, and given becomes the occasion for the gathered community to understand its very life as gift. In a simple meal that looks as skimpy as a bag lunch, we, the body of believers, eat and drink our fill of Christ's body and blood. And in doing so we become his body anew - taken, blessed, broken, and given for a suffering world.