



**“GIVING UP...SCARCITY:
EMBRACING ABUNDANCE”**

Exodus 16:1-21, 31

Rev. Elbert Paul Dulworth

First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan

One of the great children’s stories, based on a legend in a variety of cultures and told in several different forms, is *Stone Soup*. How many of you remember the story of *Stone Soup*? While it may be told in a few different variations, some in which there is a traveler in the countryside and others where there is a group of soldiers returning from the war, the story is essentially the same.

In Marcia Brown’s retelling of the legend, three soldiers are walking down an old country road. They are tired and hungry, as they have not eaten in two days. When they come upon a village and seek some food from the villagers, they are turned away at every door. It seems that everyone has just enough food for themselves, but not enough to spare for the soldiers. Everyone knows that the soldiers could eat them out of house and home.

They eventually convince the peasant villagers to let them borrow a large pot so they can make “stone soup.” The villagers help them to fill the big pot with water and build a fire to bring the water to boil. They also help the soldiers find three smooth, round stones to drop in the pot. By this time, the whole village seems to be looking on. They’ve never heard of stone soup before.

As the stones are boiling away, the soldiers begin to talk about how good the soup is. Yet it would be much better if they had some salt and pepper. Soon the children of the village bring them some salt and pepper. Stirring in the salt and pepper, the soldiers comment about how good the soup would be if they had some carrots. Before you know it, another villager brings some carrots.

Slicing the carrots into the boiling water, the soldiers begin to speak of other things that would make the soup even better yet. Cabbage, beef, potatoes, barley, and milk are all mentioned, and each time someone comes up with the needed items. This is pretty remarkable for a village where nobody had anything to share with these hungry soldiers.

When the soup was ready to be served, the entire village was invited to partake. As the spread was laid out on tables, other items came out including a roast, bread, and cider to share with everyone. The whole village ate and had their fill of the wonderful stone soup that had been prepared by these soldiers. As bedtime approached, the soldiers (once not welcomed) were offered the finest beds for the night.

The next morning, as the soldiers prepared to leave, the whole village came out to thank them for teaching them how to make stone soup. Now that they knew how to make soup from stones, they'd never go hungry again.

In our scripture lesson this morning, Moses has been leading the people out of slavery in Egypt towards the promised land. They have already crossed the Red Sea and watched as the armies of Pharaoh were washed away behind them as they crossed the sea on dry ground. With Moses, they had witnessed some pretty amazing things.

At this point in their story, however, they have grown hungry. While Moses may have led them to freedom, they begin to wonder what that freedom really looks like. As the pangs of hunger begin to set in, they remember that while they were treated harshly in Egypt, they always ate their fill. Have Moses and Aaron led them into this wilderness to die of hunger? Will God abandon them in this wilderness to die of starvation?

While the Israelites are grumbling against Moses and Aaron, God hears their complaints and tells Moses that God plans to rain down "bread from heaven." God tells Moses that when that happens, Moses should instruct the people to "go out and gather enough for that day."¹ On the sixth day, before the Sabbath, the people may gather twice as much.² In this way, God even makes provisions for the people to observe the Sabbath day of rest. When Aaron speaks to the people, we see that in the evening they'll receive protein in the form of quail. In the morning, they'll have their fill of bread. At night, they feast on quail.

Throughout the passage, God tells Moses, Aaron, and thus the Israelites that in this provision, they are to remember that God is "the Lord their God." Over and over again, the reminder is given that God is the one who is leading them out of Egypt (not Moses and Aaron), and God will provide for them along the journey. On the journey, there will be enough as they remember that God as the source of their salvation and provision.

When the Israelites first encounter the fine, flaky substance that was like dew or frost on the ground, they ask one another "What is it?"³ Moses explains that it is the bread from the Lord and instructs them again to gather as much as they need to provide for those in their own tents. When they did so, some gathered more while others gathered less. Yet when they measured it, those who gathered more had nothing left over and those who gathered less had what was needed. Moses instructed them to leave none of it until the morning.⁴

Some of the people, however, either gathered more than their share or saved the manna, the bread from heaven, until the morning. Perhaps they struggled to believe that there would be enough the next day. Maybe like the villagers in *Stone Soup*, they wanted to make sure that their families would continue to eat. Whatever the reason, they hoarded some of the manna. The only problem was that the reserved bread spoiled. By the morning, it had worms in it and had "become foul." Their actions upset Moses. Each morning they gathered as much as they needed, but when the sun got hot during the day, the leftovers melted away.⁵

God assured the people that they would have "enough," but they sought to ensure their own survival in the wilderness by gathering more than they needed. Each morning God provided an

abundance of bread and each evening an abundance of quail. Yet, it was almost as if they weren't sure that what had been provided today would be around for them tomorrow.

Some might argue that they were being good stewards of what was provided. In gathering more than was necessary, however, they failed to trust that God would provide enough each day of their travels through this wilderness. So each day, as the leftovers they collected went bad, they were reminded yet again to trust God for another day's supply when it was needed.

While there is lots of speculation about what the substance actually was, the Israelites decided to call it "manna."⁶ There's some speculation that "manna" is a derivative of an Egyptian word that means "What?", essentially asking, "What is it?"⁷ That's the question they asked Moses in Hebrew when they first encountered the manna. In any case, the Israelites are called to remember each day that the "manna" is the daily bread that is provided by God. With the exception of the sixth day, it's not to last several days. Trusting in God for daily bread is a daily requirement in the wilderness. God's abundance is more than "enough," but it's hard to move beyond their fears of scarcity; of not having enough. The wilderness can be a difficult place to live. Yet, like the villagers in *Stone Soup*, they are reminded that sharing from the abundance is the way that leads to life.

The Israelites are not the only ones to fear scarcity in the midst of God's abundance. From time to time, we, too, can be caught up in trying to gather enough to care for ourselves and those that we love when there is plenty for the world around us. While there's nothing wrong with responsibly investing our resources and providing for a solid future, it's amazing how easily we become so overly anxious about having "enough" that we fail to recognize the need that may be in our midst and our call to share.

Is this not what the villagers in *Stone Soup* as well as the Israelites struggled to understand? When we think about the vastness of the earth's resources, I'm always amazed that people still go to bed hungry at night. That's why the CROP Walk is such an important part of what we do in the fall as we seek to end hunger in our communities and around the world by sharing from God's abundance.

I'm so thankful for our high school youth who, in recognizing a need in our midst, have decided to help to build a tiny home at Cass in Detroit to end homelessness in our area. Their visionary leadership in this mission to change the world is a blessing and an example for us to follow. They remind us that as we share our resources with others, the world might come to know the God whose abundance is enough. It's quite a God-sized dream to raise money to build a house. Selling subs, flocking yards...they are leading the way of generosity in our midst that the world may be transformed by God's abundance.

On this first Sunday of the month, in the midst of our Lenten journey, as we find ourselves following Jesus into the wilderness, on the path that leads to Jerusalem and the cross, we gather once more around a table to break bread. In the sacrament of communion, we participate in sharing bread from heaven, the grace of God, which comes to us in abundance that we might share that with the world around us. At the table, as we break bread and offer it to one another,

we give up our fears of scarcity to realize a God who provides us with “enough”—enough for today and enough to share.

Each time we gather at this table, there seem to be leftovers. Perhaps the communion stewards are making sure that we have enough. Perhaps others break a smaller piece when they come forward. I like to think that the presence of leftovers is a proclamation of God’s abundance.

In a world that all too often fears not having enough, abundance begins as bread is broken, as God’s people give up their fear of scarcity in order to embrace the abundance that God has for us and for our world. Transformation begins as we break bread around a table and make a place for others to taste and see the goodness of our God. Generosity flows, abundance is seen, in common bread, broken and shared.

Oh, friends, imagine what could happen if only our lives were broken bread!

¹ Exodus 16:4, NRSV.

² Exodus 16:5.

³ Exodus 16:13-15.

⁴ Exodus 16:16-19.

⁵ Exodus 16:20.

⁶ Exodus 16:31.

⁷ Posner, Menachem. https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/1410463/jewish/What-Does-Manna-Mean.htm