

Empty to be Full
1 Corinthians 15:12-20 **Luke 6:17-26**

Welcome to our annual Stone Soup Luncheon Sunday. This tradition started a number of years ago as a time to enjoy fellowship and hear a tiny bit about what we here at IPC do towards making stone soup for the world around us.

If you are not familiar with the story of the stone soup, there are lots of variations, many with small variations from country to country, however let me tell you the short version:

One day a man went to a village and found that all the people were hiding. There was a farmer who came by and the man asked the farmer why everyone was hiding. The farmer said that all the people of village were hungry, and the children were weak. The people of the village were afraid that someone would steal the food that they had, so they hid.

The man went to the lake and filled a pot with water. He added a stone to the pot full of water and brought it to the village. He put it on a fire to cook.

The farmer asked him what he was making. The man told him it was Stone Soup. The farmer said that he had never heard of Stone Soup and asked if he could have some. The man said "of course, but it would taste so much better if I only had a potato to add", so the farmer gave him a potato.

Along came another villager and he asked the man what he was making. The man said it was Stone Soup. The villager said that he had never heard of Stone Soup and asked if he could have some. The man said of course, but it would taste so much better if I only had some beans to add. The villager came back with a handful of beans and added it to the soup.

A woman came along and asked what the man was making. He said he was making Stone Soup. The woman asked if she could have some. The man said of course, but it would taste so much better if I only had an onion, so she added her onion to the soup.

All the people in the village started to smell the stone soup and came to see what the man was cooking. They all added their vegetables to the soup. After a while, the soup pot was filled with many wonderful flavors and the entire village had a feast.

Everybody thanked the stranger and he was there for many days to feed them the Stone Soup.

Stone Soup...making a great deal from a very little...with the help of others.

We do that here, you know. Just like the pots of soup that are currently simmering in the kitchen, we all pitch in and make something special with our gifts. Sue brings the stock and starts the two pots to simmering...what happens next is up to all of you. The additions, the spices, the flavors are never the same, as the contributions are never the same, but the result is always wonderful!

That's the way it should be, as each time is unique and a reflection of the unique character of the church family at that time. I haven't sneaked a sample (drat!) however I can promise you that today will be no different!

It always strikes me as funny how something as simple as a pot of broth can become such a great meal. Together, we make something from very little; we make our own stone soup.

And with that thought in mind, let's turn to the scripture for today.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is recorded as speaking in what is known as the Sermon on the Plain. He paraphrases a few of His teachings from the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are you..."

Somewhere on a level place in Galilee, surrounded by a great multitude, Jesus spoke about fullness.

He starts by preaching about fullness that feels empty - and also the richness that feels like poverty, the laughter that feels like weeping, and the power and prestige that ultimately feel weak and inadequate.

Now I get that, I really do. I've seen it in the congregations I've served and in the world around me. Is it really surprising that the divorce rate among the rich and famous hovers between 85 and 90%? It's hard to be about someone else when you are stuck being about you.

The happiest people I know are not the richest. The people I respect most, living full, rich lives, are not the most powerful. The people I see laughing loudest at someone else's misfortune are never the happiest.

I would never have believed it at the time, but the "mean girls", you know the ones, the girls that made EVERYONE'S life a misery in high school...where are they now? Are they happier? More fulfilled? More accomplished? Have they contributed more to the world about them? You know the answer to that. The problem is, of course, in the world in which we live we are not readily encouraged to favor meekness and hunger and poverty. In fact, quite the opposite; we are hard-wired to look out for ourselves.

That's a problem, isn't it? Oh, the media can tell us things like "greed is good". We can have leaders who believe that the end always justifies the means. And we can be told to spend, buy, use, consume...But we know something's out of balance, don't we?

We long for balance.

Jesus' mission was to be a light to the world, not just to a privileged inner circle, but to the entire world. If we are to accept and join in that mission, we have no choice but to embrace His mission and prioritize the "other", those outside the circle of privilege. And let's face it, most of us here represent privilege in some way or other.

Let's be clear on this; Jesus makes it quite clear that the things with which we fill-up our lives often leave us empty; on the other hand, when we are left empty by a disregarding world, God will fill us up with that which sustains.

So you face a choice: are you going to be eternally full in God's kingdom, Jesus asks, or are you going to be full and satisfied in this world? If you hoard the world's goods, then you have already received all you are going to get for your efforts – emptiness.

But there is a better way. Jesus lays it out for us.

Let me give you an example: On a bitter cold February night more than 70 years ago, the US transport ship Dorchester was struck by a torpedo and sank. Four Army chaplains worked to distribute life jackets, calm the men and help them get into the lifeboats.

There weren't enough life jackets or lifeboats to go around, so the chaplains took none for themselves. They gave away everything they had and then joined hands and prayed together as the ship sank.

These men did something crazy by the world's standard, but they lived the reality of the Beatitudes. They gave us a living parable of how to shine Jesus' light to the whole world, entering into the fullness of God's kingdom with hands and hearts wide open – and empty, but full.

Voltaire wrote, "With great power comes great responsibility" (And yes, it was quoted in Spiderman as well, but Voltaire came before Stan Lee.)

I think we can paraphrase that to fit our own lives by saying something more like, "with great privilege, or great resources, or great ability, or great heart comes great responsibility."

Maybe you don't feel like you have great privilege or great resources or great abilities or a great heart. You're wrong.

It's that simple.

Now please don't hear me wrong; I am not saying that you have to sacrifice your life before you have responded to Jesus' teachings. I AM saying that there is richness in having less, joy in sharing the sorrow of others, strength in living by conviction of faith, rather than by the standards of the world.

It's kind of like Stone Soup, really.

The congregation owns the pot. It would be difficult (but not impossible) without a large pot! Sue brings the stock and puts the pots on the stove. Someone brought carrots, someone noodles, someone else onions, or beans, or peas or spices...many hands contributed.

The reality, of course, is that we could not feed the entire congregation from the contributions of one family or one individual. However, when we share what we have, everyone here is welcome to the feast. And a feast it is!

That's the way stone soup works, that's the way IPC works. Your coat hanging in the closet last month now keeps someone else warm. The hamburger you skipped this week is now sending someone else to school. The night you stayed in to watch Netflix instead of going to a movie is now feeding a family of 4 a warm dinner tonight.

Don't get me wrong, I like nice things as well as the next person. Heck, I wish I had the money to buy a Maserati sports car. I don't want the car, just the money to buy it because I can think of an awful lot of things I could do with that money before I would buy that kind of car!

So here we are, getting ready for the stone soup that is really starting to smell good. Intentionally welcoming everyone to share. Not telling anyone to stay away but inviting them to stay. Is it really that hard?

Jesus taught that there are some kinds of fullness that feels empty, some kinds of richness that feels like poverty, some kinds of laughter that feels like weeping, and that there is power and prestige that ultimately feel weak and inadequate.

Sometimes the difference between empty and full is as simple as awareness, noticing, intentionality. Buying to support those in need...while we were in Egypt, we bought the alabaster shade I used for the children's moment. I COULD have saved a considerable amount if I would have bought the machine-made item. It was smoother, slicker, more "perfect" and cheaper. This one is imperfect and made by hand. The purchase price went to support an artesian, a tradition, a way of life.

Will my purchase make a difference? In the long run, I don't know if it will for the workshop, but it will for me.

Remember those "mean girls" I mentioned earlier? After my experience with them I promised myself that I would never laugh at anyone's pain but would always laugh with someone's joy. Does that make a difference? It does for me.

Jesus taught us as well that there are some kinds of emptiness that feel full, some kinds of poverty that feel rich, some kinds of shared sorrow that feels like laughter, that ultimately accepting that we are weak and inadequate is not, I repeat NOT a failure, but an invitation for God to come into our lives and make the difference.

Just like stone soup, we can't do it alone, but together, we can change our world.