

**Sermon: Rev Susanna Pain**  
**3 August 2008**

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 14:12-21 **Feeding of 5,000**

**The Story of Stone Soup**

Once upon a time, somewhere in post-war Eastern Europe, there was a great famine in which people jealously hoarded whatever food they could find, hiding it even from their friends and neighbours. One day a wandering soldier came into a village and began asking questions as if he planned to stay for the night.

"There's not a bite to eat in the whole province", he was told. "Better keep moving on."

"Oh, I have everything I need", he said. "In fact, I was thinking of making some stone soup to share with all of you." He pulled an iron cauldron from his wagon, filled it with water, and built a fire under it. Then, with great ceremony, he drew an ordinary-looking stone from a velvet bag and dropped it into the water.

By now, hearing the rumour of food, most of the villagers had come to the square or watched from their windows. As the soldier sniffed the "broth" and licked his lips in anticipation, hunger began to overcome their scepticism.

"Ahh", the soldier said to himself rather loudly, "I do like a tasty stone soup. Of course, stone soup with *cabbage* – that's hard to beat."

Soon a villager approached hesitantly, holding a cabbage he'd retrieved from its hiding place, and added it to the pot. "Capital!" cried the soldier. "You know, I once had stone soup with cabbage and a bit of salt beef as well, and it was fit for a king."

The village butcher managed to find some salt beef ... and so it went, through potatoes, onions, carrots, mushrooms, and so on, until there was indeed a delicious meal for all. The villages offered the soldier a great deal of money for the magic stone, but he refused to sell and travelled on the next day...

Jesus was grieving. His cousin John had been cruelly and misguidedly beheaded – for sport, or to save face. How does one respond to that? Jesus went away to a deserted place. He needed time to grieve, to make sense of this senseless act.

And the crowds when they heard – heard John had died, heard Jesus had gone, followed. Searching for something – hope, meaning, sustenance?

Jesus had compassion – In his own suffering, his heart went out to them. He healed, he taught. He was present with them, all these people in need. He fed them and when evening came his followers wanted to send them home, get rid of them – ostensibly they too were being compassionate – ‘the people need to go to get food’. The subtext – ‘come on, it’s time to pack up now, we’re tired’ ... to dispense community rather than build it up.

‘You give them something to eat’ says Jesus. What a challenge. ‘Us? We haven’t got enough. We are overwhelmed with the numbers. We just can’t – See five loaves of bread and two fish ... You are being unrealistic ...’

‘Bring them to me’ he said. ‘Bring them to me.’ (‘I can tell you, there were some quizzical looks between us. What would he do this time?’) ‘Here they are.’

Jesus took them  
Blessed  
Broke

And gave them to us to share – This is eucharist, this is communion.

Took, blessed, broke, gave ... and there was enough for everyone – more than enough.

Our tiny offering, in Jesus hands, is enough ...  
More than enough ...

So why do you hold back?

I am embarrassed. It is only small. I am not good enough. I am too busy.

With your tiny offering  
we will build a community,  
we will care for those in need,  
we will grow.

‘You give them something to eat.’

We offer what we have. Jesus takes what we have, who we are, blesses, breaks, gives and it is enough...

In an article entitled ‘The Scarcity Myth’ Frances Moore Lappé writes of attending a conference on ‘world hunger in a concerned church’ in 1973 seeing images of starving people in Africa – killed by drought ... The church called for more food aid. Sharing the abundance of here with scarce over there. Thirty years later, the same story – again drought was blamed – with aids and government corruption.

Lappé suggests that the dominant mindset is that we are in a perpetual battle to overcome scarcity – but that in fact we humans are creating scarcity in so many ways, for example, by increasing meat consumption, so that whereas 30

years ago almost no grain went to livestock in China and Thailand, now over a quarter of grain consumption in these countries occurs in the production of meat.

Fish, formerly the food of the poor is harvested to feed salmon – priced way beyond the poor.

Typically nearly a quarter of total global marine harvest is thrown back dead or dying. This in a world where over fishing has led to a decline of virtually all commercially sold fish.

Lappé went looking for signs of hope. S/he visited Brazil's fourth largest city, Belo Horizonte.

*In 1993 its government had declared food a right of citizenship. This shift of thinking triggered dozens of innovations that have begun to end hunger in the city. Little patches of city-owned land were made available at low rent to local organic farmers as long as they would keep prices within the reach of poor, inner-city dwellers. The city redirected the thirteen cents provided by the federal government for each school child's lunch away from the purchase of corporate processed foods to buying local organic food instead. The result is enhanced children's nutritional intake.*

*To keep the market honest, the city teamed up with university researchers who each week posted the lowest prices of forty-five basic food commodities at bus stops and broadcast them over radio. This way, inner-city dwellers had sound information to fight against price gouging by unscrupulous grocers. With this new food-as-a-right-of-citizenship perspective, people began to perceive abundance where they had never seen it before: manioc leaves and eggshells previously tossed out as waste were processed into a nutritious additive for bread for school kids. All of these efforts consume, we are told, only one percent of the municipal budget.*

*At the end of our stay in Belo Horizonte, we met Adriana Aranha, whose job in city government is to coordinate all these efforts. "When you began," I asked her, "did you realize how much difference your efforts might make? Did you know how out of step you were with the neo-liberal approach that says government can do no good and the market can do no harm?" Aranha replied, animated and intense, in Portuguese. And we couldn't understand a word. We sat patiently, but then I saw her eyes start to tear up. Unable to wait any longer, I nudged our interpreter. "Please, what is she saying?" "I knew we were out of step," Aranha said. "We had so much hunger in the world, but what is so upsetting, what I didn't know when I started this, is it's so easy to end it."*

*I've thought about that conversation many times since. Why was Aranha able to say "it's easy"? I realize now that she is right if – only if – we can see with new eyes and free ourselves from the choking momentum of*

*the inherited mental map. Then we can suddenly see new, more life-serving forms emerging. These breakthroughs may be hard to detect – not only because the prevailing media doesn't cover them, but also because they do not constitute a new "ism". They don't add up to a new, packaged formula. They are about ordinary people trusting their deepest values as well as their common sense. In the process new mental maps emerge in which human beings are more than narrow consumers and democracy is more than a matter of pre-paid elections.*

Seasons of the Spirit <sup>TM</sup> Congregational Life Pentecost 1 (p.112)  
Learning & Serving August 3-9 2008

Jesus took, blessed, broke, gave ... and there was enough for everyone – more than enough.