

Harvest Festival: Stone Soup

Matthew 25: 31-45

Once upon a time, just as the sun was setting, three weary travellers came to the edge of a town. Their feet were blistered. Their mouths were dry and their bellies were aching with hunger.

“I’m starving,” moaned the first.

“I’m exhausted,” groaned the second.

“Let’s stop in this town and ask for help,” said the third.

Now the people who lived in this town were by no means rich and what little food they had, they always kept for themselves – hiding it even from their friends and relations. When they looked out of their houses and saw the three travellers, they said to each other, “Look! Hungry strangers! We know what they want! Quick! Let’s hide all the food and pretend we have nothing!” And that’s exactly what they did.

The travellers came to the first house and knocked gently on the door.

“Good day and peace be with you,” said the first. “Will you please kindly share with us a little of your food?”

“And a corner where we can sleep for the night?” added the second.

“We’ll tell you all about our travels in return,” promised the third.

“Sorry,” said the man of the house. “We gave all our spare food to the travellers who came here last week.”

“And there’s only one room in this house,” said the man’s wife.

Both of them were lying.

The travellers sighed and went to the next house.

“Go away!” said the owners. “The harvest was very bad this year and every bit of food we had is gone!”

They too were lying.

At every house the answer was the same. The townspeople always found an excuse: their children were sick; they had relatives staying; they were going

away; a plague of mice had eaten everything – one lie after another! The travellers knew that they were being lied to, but what could they do?

They were just about to give up and leave the town, when one of the travellers had an idea. “The people here have a lot to learn,” he said. “Let’s play a little trick on them and teach them a very big lesson!”

“An excellent idea,” said the second.

“But what sort of trick?” asked the third. “And what kind of lesson?”

“Gather round,” said the first. “And I’ll tell you.” And so, in whispers and secret signs, he did. And as the plan unfolded, his two companions nodded and grinned from ear to ear.

As soon as they were ready to put their plan into action, the first traveller spoke in a big, booming voice so that the nearby townspeople were sure to hear. “How terribly sad that the poor people in this town have no food,” he said. “But never mind. We three shall go to the town-square and there, as night falls, we shall make a pot of our DELICIOUS AND NUTRITIOUS STONE SOUP!”

When they heard this, the townspeople were extremely curious. They’d never heard of stone soup and wondered how it was made and what it tasted like.

“How do you make stone soup?” they asked the travellers.

“We’ll gladly show you,” replied the first.

“Follow us,” said the second.

“And bring a big empty pot with you and some firewood too,” said the third. So they did.

Arriving in the town-square, one of the travellers made a fire, another filled the empty pot with water and the third placed it over the fire to boil. “And now,” said the first, “for the special ingredients.” With a grand and dramatic flourish so that everyone could see, he reached into a leather satchel, took out three smooth round stones and plopped them into the pot of water. “Soon we shall feast!” he exclaimed, stirring the pot with a big wooden spoon.

As the rumour of a feast spread round the town, an excited crowd began to gather in the square. “Just as we planned!” whispered the first traveller to his friends.

After the pot of water had been boiling for some time, the travellers began to sniff the air and lick their lips. "And now," said the first, "I will taste it!" As the traveller lifted a spoonful of bubbling water to his mouth, the crowd craned forward to hear his verdict. "It is completely ... delicious!" he announced.

At this, the crowd gasped and gurgled with delight.

"True," continued the traveller, "some people might say that it needs a little salt and pepper, but apart from that it is practically perfect."

No sooner had he said this, than the townspeople sent their children hurrying home to fetch salt and pepper, which the clever travellers added to the pot.

After a while, the second traveller tasted the soup. "Mmm!" he said, rubbing his belly and moaning with appreciation. "These extraordinary stones do indeed make an excellent soup! Although ... perhaps just a few carrots would make it even more delicious."

Just then, an old woman in the crowd called out, "Now that I think of it, I believe I may have a carrot or two in the house!" And straightaway, she scurried home and back she hobbled carrying a whole sack full of sweet crunchy carrots, which the travellers quickly sliced and added to the pot.

"I suppose a perfect stone soup should also have some onions and perhaps even some cabbage too," said the third traveller. "But what's the point of dreaming about ingredients that we simply haven't got?"

At this, an old man's voice was heard from the middle of the growing crowd. "I've got some onions!" he cried. "And cabbages too!" And off he shuffled, returning a few moments later wheeling a barrow full of onions and fresh green cabbages, which again the travellers quickly shredded and put in the pot.

After another tasting session, the first traveller paused with a look of pure ecstasy on his face, before finally declaring: "This stone soup is totally scrumptious! Although ... I suppose that a few little fishes and possibly some potatoes and perhaps some oil or margarine would improve the flavour ever so slightly, but apart from that – and maybe some barley and some leeks and some herbs and a drop or two of milk or cream – I can truly say that the king himself would be happy to eat this most delicious and nutritious stone soup!"

When the crowd heard these words, they were deeply impressed and off they ran to fetch all the food which they had hidden earlier that evening. Soon they returned with sacks and barrows full of tasty ingredients, which the travellers

piled into the pot as quickly as they could. "Food fit for a king!" murmured the townspeople. "And all made from stones! Isn't it amazing?!"

Finally, the travellers announced that the soup was ready. "But don't worry," said the first. "There's enough for everybody!" Tables and chairs were placed in the square and bowls and spoons and napkins too. Torches were lit and decorations hung. In the middle of the hustle and bustle, a townsman called out, "A soup as special as this deserves nothing but the best! Let's fetch bread and beer and barrels of wine!" And so the feast began and everyone agreed that they'd never tasted anything so delicious in their lives.

And when the feast was over, the townspeople listened with rapt attention as the travellers told their tales from far and wide. And the townspeople told the travellers all about their lives in the town. And then there was singing and dancing until late into the night.

Early in the morning, just as the sun was rising, the travellers departed. "Thank you so much for teaching us how to make stone soup," said the townspeople.

"You're very welcome," replied the travellers, nodding and grinning.

"Be sure to visit us again," said the townspeople.

"We certainly will," said the travellers.

And they did. And they all lived happily ever after.

Nobody knows for sure whether the townspeople ever realised that they'd been tricked that night. But in a way, it doesn't really matter because they certainly DID learn a very important lesson: that ***when we each give a little, we can achieve a lot!***

As our Harvest giving this year, we've asked you to bring items, or donate money to the Foodbank (www.elyfoodbank.org.uk), because when we each give a little, it can help a lot. Help for those who, for whatever reason, are struggling to feed their families in the local area. And from our story from the Bible read earlier, we know that every time we give food to the hungry, or water to the thirsty, it will be as if we are doing these things for Jesus himself. So, thank you for your generosity.

Amen.