

# “Stone Soup”

August 8, 2021

Matthew 12: 28-31

*Quest: Travel as a Spiritual Act series*

## Introduction

In just a couple of weeks, school will start again. This year promises to be a very interesting one as there will be at least 3 groups of students who will be going. The youngest pupils will have no history of what it will be like to be in a classroom. For them, everything will be new.

Those entering middle school and high school will have a period of adjustment as classes move from online to in person instruction, a reversal of what students did last fall. For the previous two graduating classes, all the planning that accompanies senior year was halted by the pandemic. Those who were freshmen and sophomores, when the pandemic began, now hope their senior year will be like they dreamed when they were in middle school.

Teachers, staff, students and parents will return to campus through the filter of the pandemic. Let’s lift them up in a special prayer as we discover new ways to be in relationship with one another. Our schools will be a microcosm of how we all begin to interact with each other, and embrace being together, once again.

## Move 1

As I remember the excitement that accompanies going back to school, I also remember how nervous I was when I started middle school. My parents sent my sister and I to a private boarding school because they had little confidence in the stability of the city’s public school system. After being dropped off at our dorms on Monday, registration for students was the day after Labor Day, with classes beginning on Wednesday.

Students were scheduled to register by grade. Seventh graders went first, then 8<sup>th</sup> graders and so on. Registration took place in the gym and the school also used a Big Sister/Little Sister program to greet all new students and help them feel more comfortable in those first few weeks. As I entered the gym, I followed others in line, not knowing who was in my grade, not sure of where I was supposed to go or what I was expected to do.

That’s when the joyous screams started. Girls from other grades were excited to see each other after the summer break. Mini reunions were taking place all over the gym as they caught up on what they did since they were together. My sister was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and she sort of watched over me, to make sure I was signing up for classes and

getting registered. Until someone called out her name and she was gone to say hello and see her classmates. A little later, she came back to where I was and explained that I would be doing the same thing next year.

At the time, I didn't think so. All the people in that room, except my real sister and my Big Sister were strangers. I didn't even know which ladies would be my teachers or which subjects they would cover. Those first few days were overwhelming. Not only did I have to learn about lockers and combinations, but lunch in a cafeteria was a very complicated process. There was also getting from one classroom to another, figuring out how to carry the books I'd need without stopping by my locker, because back then, there were no backpacks, and trying to get through the loads of homework each teacher assigned. The school's campus consisted of three buildings and during those first couple of weeks, it was easy to end up in the wrong one or not know the shortcuts to get from one building to the next before the bell rang.

But in no time, I learned about the culture of the school, it's rich and pioneering history as well as what it meant to be an Andrews girl. By the next fall, at the beginning of my second year, my sister was right. I was excited to see friends I had met the year before. By the time I graduated, I was able to discover and share my growing sense of who I was and what I could accomplish in life.

When I attended the Andrews School, the philosophy for the students was on the cutting edge of what schools were offering. The founders had an idea that was their stone soup starter. Over time, though other school systems caught up to their unique and innovative curriculum. The leadership of the school realized that they needed to adapt to changing times and decided to merge with a boy's private school which was nearby. Over the course of several years, both institutions identified the best of what they brought to the new school, keeping those elements, and discarding some of what hadn't worked. The new school is still committed to being a pioneer for the educational tools needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and using those tools to prepare the next generation for career options after high school.

## **Move 2**

Perspective is always key to where we are today and how we have arrived here. The phrase "hindsight is 2020" is so true. Looking back on my years at Andrews, I never realized how so much of who I am and what I do came from those 6 years.

In our life and faith journeys, we may now be able to recognize how God was shaping us for this moment and this time in our world, though when we considered what we wanted to do for a living or provide for our families, we didn't see God's work in us or through us.

The passage from 1 Corinthians 12: 4-6 reminds us that there are different kinds of gifts, service and works. And yet the Spirit of God is at work within each of us. As we are continuously shaped and molded by our Lord for the mission and ministry we do in His name, we may overlook the significance of each thread in the tapestry we are creating.

As I considered how I would craft today's message, I explored the story and history of Stone Soup. To my surprise I discovered many more versions of this particular folk tale than I expected. I searched the internet for the way I remembered the story as a child. It began when two grandchildren told their grandfather they were hungry. He moved a cooking pot onto the fire hook, filled it with water and asked the children to go outside and find a good-sized stone.

When they watched their grandfather place the stone in the pot of water: they thought he was a little addled. They asked him if the stone soup would be more flavorful with carrots, onions, potatoes or other vegetables, spices and even meat. Their grandfather was very intent on stirring the water and made no response to their suggestions.

So, the children decided to ask their neighbors for ingredients to turn the pot of water into something more delicious. And the people in their village responded, bringing all the ingredients to make a hearty and savory soup. There was more than enough for the neighbors to share in the meal they helped create.

After everyone left, the grandfather told his grandchildren they had learned about the secret ingredient which made the soup so delicious. It wasn't the stone, or the water or any of the ingredients the neighbors added. **Sharing**, the grandfather said, was the ingredient that made the soup so good.

In each of the stories I read, the ingredients were usually the same: carrots, potatoes, onions, cabbage, tomatoes and even salt and pepper. It was the people who started making the soup who differed. In one version the chefs were three hungry soldiers who knocked on the doors of villagers asking for food. When they were turned away, they asked for a pot instead and started the soup. In another version, two men had their own pot, and set it up in the village square. They would engage people in conversation, telling them how they were just like someone they met on their travels. Then they would invite that person to contribute to the soup.

I thought I was done with my research until I received an email with this picture. It is Dolly Parton's version of stone soup. Not knowing she had a recipe, I looked it up on YouTube and found a video from the Hallmark Channel. She talked about the folktale, then shared her mother's novel twist.

Whenever Dolly's mom made stone soup, she asked her 12 children to go outside and choose a stone. Dolly's mom would ask the children to wash their stones. By watching what they were doing she could tell which child needed a little extra loving care. That child's stone would be the first ingredient in the soup.

Other ingredients followed. And since Dolly was raised on a farm, there were plenty of hands and ingredients for the children to help make a delicious heartwarming meal. When the pot was empty, Dolly's mom would save the stone, placing it with the other ones which had been used as the soup starter.

### **Move 3**

After her story, the hosts and Dolly created another version of Stone soup, which they also called dump soup. They spoke about which ingredients were included, and others that could also be added. Unlike most cooking show I've watched, there wasn't a list of the ingredients available for me to make Dolly's mom's recipe. I will have to play and replay the video to get all of the steps written down.

Last December, a friend of mine sent me an invitation to join Hello Fresh. For those who are unfamiliar with the company, it is a meal-kit service with a great selection of menus, easy to follow recipes and fresh ingredients. After those first few sample meals, I decided to keep Hello Fresh on my grocery list. (This is not a commercial)

There are so many features that I like about the company. Before I began ordering from it, I found myself making the same three dinners each week. Now, every couple of weeks I look forward to trying something way outside of my comfort zone. I mostly order vegetarian dishes and I can now prepare chickpeas in a variety of ways, make a vegetarian Shephard's Pie, a decent banh mi and paella.

Sometimes, I tweak the step-by-step instructions to suit my tastes. I don't usually add salt when directed. I also skip over the steps on making lemon zest or juice. I have opted out of making the sauces which use mayonnaise as the main ingredient. Still, I follow the basic steps provided on the recipe card as I prepare a wide variety of new dishes.

And I bet you're wondering, what does that have to do with today's Gospel lesson? Simply this, Our Lord has given us our spiritual recipe card. The Great Commandment is our stone soup. This rock represents the foundation of who we are as Christians. The original rock was not an object, it was Peter who was commissioned, along with the other apostles to feed Christ's sheep.

And that is how our faith was born. We are called to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. This is the stone which has been placed in the pot. Through the Spirit, we each have the ingredients to make a soup and build a community in which everyone can share.

Although we don't have step by step instructions, Paul's epistles help to inform us how we can share our unique gifts to support one another on our Christian journey. The book of James encourages us to be as dedicated to works as we are to our faith. I also believe that, like Dolly Parton, we share the story of how we make the meal we are preparing for the sustenance of those who add their unique ingredients to our common meal.

Please take a couple minutes to think about how you have contributed or how you may contribute to the missions and ministries at Lake Harbor UMC. Who you are and where you came from are essential to what ingredients you may offer to continue to be part of this faith community which is making a difference for Muskegon, Michigan and the world.

If you feel comfortable doing so, I'd like to know what kind of things you wrote.

### **Conclusion**

Our Lord's request for our lives is to share who we are and what we have with one another. Jesus' life, mission and ministry is a declaration of God's love and what our Lord is willing to do for our salvation. How we seek to follow Jesus' example each day is the task that is ever before us.

Know these three things. 1. All that we do, we do together. Isn't that the definition of community? We are all children of the living God, seeking to care for and support one another on our Christian journey. 2. Everyone has something to contribute. God knows who we are and has given us the gifts we need to be change agents at this time and in this place. Even if we wanted to, we can't hide God's light under a bushel. And why would we want to? The more ingredients we add to the pot, the richer the meal we make will be. 3. God asks us to give. The parable of the three servants who were entrusted with gold while their employer went away, from Matthew 25, is an admonition for us to share what we have and to embrace the words long attributed to John Wesley to: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can." Let it be so. And amen.