

# Stone Soup

*When it feels as though we're living in a time of scarcity, how can we act from a place of abundance? This service relates a familiar story, introducing two strangers who coax an entire village into realizing the power of sharing and giving. It also encourages the congregation to be aware of opportunities to notice grace and practice random acts of kindness.*

## **Preparation** (moderate)

- Notify the congregation that a food offering will be received this Sunday, to provide canned goods for a local food bank.
- Obtain a small bag of stones and shells, a big soup pot, a long-handled spoon for stirring the pot, a ladle, a pitcher, a can of anchovies, and enough bowls and spoons for all the actors.
- Obtain “vegetables”—real ones, plastic or papier maché models, or pictures drawn by the congregation’s children.
- Create a “fire” or cooking area—you might use crumpled red and orange tissue paper.
- Recruit 3 or 4 members of the congregation to come up from their seats during the service and add vegetables to the pot at the appointed time. Provide them with their vegetables prior to the service.
- *Rehearsal will take between 2 and 3 hours.*

**Roles** (9–12, those who need to attend rehearsal are marked with \*)

- Leader\*
- Storyteller\*
- Stranger 1\*
- Stranger 2\*
- Village Elder\*
- Villager 1\*
- Villager 2\*
- Villager 3\*
- Villager 4\*
- Up to 3 extra Villagers can be used

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*As the service begins, the Storyteller and Leader are at the front of the sanctuary.*

**STORYTELLER** It had been a cold, lean winter in the village. Winter had lasted longer than usual, and the stores of food that had been carefully gathered after the fall harvest were now nearly gone.

*All the Villagers walk up the center aisle, shivering in the cold.*

In fact, the villagers and farmers in the valley were growing fearful; spring had broken the back of winter, but it would still be weeks before the tender green shoots of new plants would come up through the rich soil of their gardens; it would be weeks before plump fish returned to the nearby rivers.

*Strangers 1 and 2 appear at the back of the sanctuary.*

Suddenly, through the morning mist, the villagers noticed two figures in the distance. Two people were walking on the road straight towards their village! Who could it be? Who's going to visit the village, and what do they want?

## Welcome

*Leader welcomes congregants and visitors.*

## Chalice Lighting

**STORYTELLER** While we were beginning our worship service, the villagers were still staring down the road, watching the two strangers approach. Would they be friendly? Were they dangerous? What reason could they have for visiting *their* village, especially during the lean days of spring? Questions whirled through the villagers' minds. As the strangers entered the village, an elder stepped forward to greet them.

**VILLAGE ELDER** Good morning and peace to you! Who passes this way?

**STRANGER 1** Greetings, and peace to you, [Sir/Madam]! We are simple travelers on a long journey.

**STRANGER 2** We seek nothing but a friendly people so that we might rest our feet for a day, share some stories and a meal, and sleep among friends tonight before continuing on our way.

**VILLAGE ELDER** [*thoughtfully*] You come in peace, and are in need of rest. We are a humble village, but a friendly one, and we would welcome hearing the stories and news that you bring from far away. We have warm fires that will keep you safe and comfortable as you sleep. But . . . a meal, you say? You want to share a meal? Do you *bring* this meal with you?

**STRANGER 2** Ah . . . we bring stories and news.

**STRANGER 1** And some lovely stones and seashells that I picked up along the way.

**STRANGER 2** [*addresses Stranger 1, rolling eyes and speaking in a stage whisper*] You and those silly seashells! You and those silly stones you just had to pick up.

[*turns to address Village Elder and other Villagers*] We bring important news from the cities on the other side of the mountain, [Sir/Madam]. We bring stories of intrigue and suspense from those who have fought dragons and lived to tell the tale! We bring the juiciest gossip of the king's new consort and her considerable assets. But we do not, I beg your understanding, bring a meal.

**STRANGER 1** Unless you want to chew on my seashells. But I wouldn't recommend it.

*Stranger 2 kicks Stranger 1, imploring him/her to pipe down. Villagers chatter among themselves as the Village Elder turns to consult with them.*

**VILLAGE ELDER** We're eager to hear your stories, my friends, and your news. [*lowers voice, raises eyebrows*] I'm particularly interested to hear about the, ahem, assets of the king's new consort. [*returns to regular voice*] Our offer of a fire and friendship still stands; you may join us for this day and night. But—we beg *your* understanding—this has been a hard winter, and we have very little food to get us through to the growing season. There's barely enough food for ourselves, so we can't provide you with a meal.

*Strangers confer briefly, then nod.*

**STRANGER 2** Thank you, [Sir/Madam]. We understand, and appreciate taking simple sanctuary with you this day and night.

*Village Elder nods, gestures for the Strangers to follow him/her and the Villagers back to the village.*

**STRANGER 1** [*addresses Stranger 2, quietly*] Drat. I'm hungry. What are we going to do? How will we eat?

**STRANGER 2** We'll think of something. Just—please—stop with the stones and seashells. I'm tired of hearing it.

*Villagers and Strangers exit.*

**LEADER** What hardship! Everyone's hungry, but no one seems able to share food. As we let the strangers and the villagers find their way to the village, let's sing together about a different kind of sharing. Please join me in singing our first hymn, "When I Am Frightened."

"When I Am Frightened," *STJ*, 1012

*Strangers 1 and 2 return to the front.*

**STORYTELLER** The two strangers were happy to enter the village. They found a beautiful glade of trees where they could be comfortable. As they settled in, their growling stomachs reminded them that, while they'd met with good fortune in this village, it wasn't outstanding fortune. The villagers seemed hungry, or stingy, or both; it was hard to tell. What was clear was that the villagers wouldn't be offering any food to the strangers anytime soon.

**STRANGER 1** I'm hungry.

**STRANGER 2** So am I, friend.

**STRANGER 1** I'm so hungry I can't stop thinking about golden griddle cakes, made from the finest cornmeal . . .

**STRANGER 2** Oh, no. Let's not speak of food. You're just making me hungrier.

**STRANGER 1** That's what I'd like to eat right now—a bi-i-i-g, steaming stack of fluffy griddle cakes, with juicy blueberries and wildflower honey on top.

**STRANGER 2** What did I just say?

**STRANGER 1** And then I'd like to eat a platter of succulent grilled fish, with roasted vegetables and sea salt.

**STRANGER 2** Am I talking to myself? Please stop.

**STRANGER 1** Fish with potatoes. Little roasted potatoes. Crispy little salty potatoes.

**STRANGER 2** If you don't stop, I'm going to leave you to rest here and find somewhere else to sit. I am. See if I don't.

**STRANGER 1** To tell you the truth, I'd settle for a nice hot bowl of soup. Too bad all we have are these stones. You're right—it was silly to pick them up. You can't make soup out of stones. Nope, nope, nope.

**STRANGER 2** That's it. First you won't stop talking about the seashells and stones, and now you won't stop with the food talk.

Stones, soup. Stones, soup. It's driving me crazy! Stone-soup-stone-soupstonesoup . . . hey. Waaaaiiiit a minute. [*excited*] Hey. Hey!

STRANGER 1 What? Did you forget to tell me that you actually *have* some griddle cakes with you?

STRANGER 2 I have an idea. Would you please show me one of your prettiest stones?

STRANGER 1 Now you're interested in my stones?

*Stranger 2 holds out hand. Stranger 1 selects a stone and hands it over.*

STRANGER 2 How would you like to make a little magic with this stone? I think it could help us make a very nice meal.

STRANGER 1 I can't imagine how, but I'm all ears. Tell me what you have in mind.

*The two Strangers whisper together as they exit.*

## Joys and Sorrows

*After the congregation has shared, the Leader calls for a period of silent meditation and allows at least a minute of silence.*

*The Village Elder and all the Villagers return to the front, set up the fire, and gather around it. Then both Strangers approach the Elder. Stranger 2 brings a stone.*

STRANGER 1 Pardon me, friend, but do you have a large pot?

VILLAGE ELDER A cooking pot? Why would you want that? If it's a bath you want, the river's right around that bend. The water's pretty cold right now, but—

STRANGER 2 A cooking pot is what we want, [Sir/Madam], and cooking is what we're going to use it for. You see, we just remembered that some of the stones my companion's carrying are . . . well, they're of the magic variety, you see, and we want to thank your village for your hospitality by making stone soup.

**VILLAGER 1** [*overhears, and steps closer to the Strangers*] Stone soup? I've never heard of such a thing! It doesn't sound very appetizing.

**STRANGER 1** Ah, but it is, [sir/madam]. Stone soup is appetizing and delectable, and it's very simple to make. All you need is the right stone, which we have; and a cooking pot, which we very much hope you'll lend us; and some fresh water from your well, which shouldn't be a problem; and finally, a small fire on which to cook, which is already before us.

*With excitement, Villagers bring forth a large cooking pot, and the Strangers gratefully accept it. Together they pantomime filling the pot with water, stoking the fire, and whispering amongst each other, while the Storyteller speaks.*

**STORYTELLER** And so it was. Curious, hungry, and eager to be of assistance, the villagers helped the two strangers fill the pot with fresh water, and then hoisted the pot over a cooking fire. As they did, the villagers whispered to one another, "Stone soup! Have you ever heard of such a thing? What can this be? How?"

**STRANGER 2** Thank you, friends. Let me now add the magic stone, and our stone soup will be underway.

*Ceremoniously drops a stone into the cooking pot and stirs.*

**VILLAGER 1** Is it ready yet?

**STRANGER 1** Not yet, friend, not yet. Like any soup, stone soup takes a while to prepare. It will be ready to eat, by and by.

**STORYTELLER** And so, the stone soup began to simmer, and the villagers stood around watching the strangers, more curious than ever but also more hungry than ever.

**LEADER** We know that there are hungry people in our own community who would be fed and comforted by the gift of food from a stranger. And so we pause to receive the food offering that you've brought with you this morning for [*name the local food*]

*bank or organization that will receive the food*]. As we sing “From You I Receive” twice, let us watch the ways that our sharing will feed those who are hungry.

“From You I Receive,” *SLT*, 402

*Allow time for congregants to finish bringing their canned goods forward before continuing with the service.*

**STORYTELLER** As the two strangers began brewing their stone soup, the hungry villagers looked on. And so the magic began.

**VILLAGER 1** Where did you learn how to make stone soup? Is it a traditional food from your homeland?

**STRANGER 2** That’s right—I mean, yes! Both of us have made stone soup many, many times. [*aside, to Stranger 1, in a stage whisper*] Help me out here, please.

**STRANGER 1** Oh yes, many times! Although this batch of soup probably won’t be quite as good as it was the last time we made it. Remember that? [*nudges and winks at Stranger 2*]

**STRANGER 2** Oh, yes. Nothing could be as delicious as *that* soup—it tasted as though the angels themselves had made it.

**STRANGER 1** Heavenly! We *might* be able to make this batch of stone soup as delicious as that one. If only . . .

**STRANGER 2** If only . . .

**VILLAGER 1** What? If only *what*?

**STRANGER 2** If only we had an onion or two. If only we could add some onions, this soup would tempt the gods themselves to come down from heaven to eat among us.

**VILLAGER 2** I might be able to help with that. I have some onions in my cellar, and was saving them for . . . well, it doesn’t matter. Would you like them for the soup?

**STRANGER 1** Of course! Thank you!



*Villager 2 adds onions to the pot; the Strangers stir and bask in the delicious smells.*

STRANGER 2 Ah, yes, now it's becoming sublime stone soup. Sort of sublime, with the onions. To be *truly* sublime, we'd also need to add a few carrots, but that would be too much to expect.

STRANGER 1 It certainly would. A few carrots are out of the question, even though they'd make our stone soup supremely sublime.

VILLAGER 3 Ahem. Actually, I still have a few carrots left in my cellar. May I give them to you for our soup?

STRANGER 2 Yes, you *may* add your carrots!

*Villager gets carrots from off to the side, then adds them to the pot as Strangers stir.*

STRANGER 1 Thank you for sharing, friend. Now our stone soup is on its way to being superbly satisfying.

VILLAGER 4 [*stands up from a seat in the congregation*] Excuse me, friends . . . .

STRANGER 2 Yes, my good [man/woman/child]?

VILLAGER 4 I mean not to interfere with your magical soup, but . . . .

STRANGER 1 Speak up, friend! What is it?

VILLAGER 4 Is there any chance that your stone soup would benefit from a few potatoes?

STRANGER 2 Certainly!

STRANGER 1 Superb! Sublime!

*Villager 4 comes forward with potatoes. Then Villagers and pre-selected members of the congregation come forward with vegetables, which they add to the pot as the Storyteller narrates the following scene.*

**STORYTELLER** One by one, the shy villagers became bolder, stepping forward to reveal that they had small treasures in their cellars and coldstores. A child was sent forward by her parents with a small cabbage. A man proffered a handful of beans, and another villager supplied a second handful of beans. Yet another villager stepped up to the pot of bubbling soup with a small bowl of barley. [*waits for this to be acted out*]

Every time someone brought forward a small contribution to the soup, the strangers gratefully accepted it and stirred it into the soup pot. Well, almost every time. There was one exception.

*Village Elder approaches the Strangers with a can of anchovies.*

**STRANGER 1** *Anchovies?* No. Ick.

**STRANGER 2** [*steps in front of Stranger 1*] What my companion means is, we couldn't possibly accept such a generous contribution, but thank you anyway. Perhaps as an appetizer?

**STORYTELLER** And so the soup pot, now filled with an assortment of vegetables and grains, began to release its tantalizing aroma throughout the village. Everyone's mouth was watering, and stomach grumbling, to think of eating such a fine meal. The stone soup was nearly complete, and the villagers' hope and gratitude began to crowd out thoughts of hunger.

**LEADER** Before we join the villagers in their feast, we pause to find our reasons for hope and gratitude. During this time of silent meditation, let us savor this moment, here and now, and the company we share. [*allows an appropriate amount of silence*]

Spirit of Life and of Love, too often, when we see someone in need, our hearts turn to stone. Too often, the people who cross paths with us move us to indifference, or irritation, or they simply become invisible to us amid the burdens we carry.

This week, or even this day, we will surely encounter someone or something who might cause our hearts to turn to stone. When that happens, Gentle Guide, may we remember that of all the gifts you give us, the greatest gift is love.

May our hearts open not just to those who are close to us, but to all people and beings whom we encounter. Let our judgment turn to forgiveness, let our irritation give way to patience, let us live our belief in compassion and love.

“Come, Come, Whoever You Are,” *SLT*, 188

**STORYTELLER** Finally. Finally! The meal was ready. After cooking for an afternoon, the strangers and their magic stone had prepared a soup that was now ready to be eaten.

**STRANGER 1** Step right up, my friends! Step right up! Bring a bowl, bring a spoon, and come taste this delicious stone soup!

*Villagers line up with bowls; Stranger 2 doles out soup from the pot.*

**VILLAGER 1** What if we run out?

**STRANGER 2** We won't run out—there's plenty for everyone to eat! That's the magic of stone soup!

*Villagers and Strangers exit.*

**STORYTELLER** No matter how old they were, every villager had his or her fill of soup from the bubbling pot. Everyone agreed that it was the tastiest soup they'd ever eaten. And no one could quite believe that the strangers had made it from a single small stone! That night, the villagers slept soundly, with full bellies and grateful hearts. It was a little easier to believe that spring, with its bounty of food, was just around the corner. It was easier for the villagers to hope that they'd never know such a deep hunger again. And it was satisfying for the villagers to reflect that, upon welcoming strangers among them, they had received a gift that they'd never expected.

**LEADER** We, too, have so much to share, not only with one another but also with the community around us. In this story, our strangers told the villagers that they created soup with a magic stone. Do you believe in magic? Do you believe the stone was magic? [*gets some responses from among the congregation*]

What one person might call magic is known to others by other names: “grace,” “random kindness and senseless acts of beauty,” and even “luck.” If you pay attention, you’ll find that we experience these moments of magic or senseless grace everywhere. Being a Spy of Kindness takes some effort and energy. It’s very easy to find problems in the world around us . . . but only very skilled spies can find grace and kindness from moment to moment.

## Offering

*The Strangers, Village Elder, and Villagers 1-4 return to the scene.*

**STORYTELLER** Dawn came early the next day. With the first call of the rooster, the strangers began to prepare for their journey. As they stepped onto the road, a few of the villagers came to see them off.

**VILLAGE ELDER** Must you go so soon?

**STRANGER 2** Go, we must. Our journey continues.

**VILLAGE ELDER** Before you leave, please, I have two questions for you. Two questions that all of us have been talking about since our meal. The first is this: Why did you take such kindness on us?

**STRANGER 1** It was *you* who were first kind to *us*, [Sir/Madam]. You welcomed us into your village . . . and you liked my shells. I always appreciate it when people admire my seashell collection.

**STRANGER 2** Our kindness was more than just repaying your kindness, however. It is our Way, and the Way of our people. It is as they write in the holy texts.

**VILLAGE ELDER** What holy texts?

**STRANGER 1** In Hebrews, it is written, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

**STRANGER 2** And in Leviticus, it says, “If a stranger lives among you, do not do him wrong. Strangers living among you will be

like your own people. Love them as you love yourself, because you were once strangers.”

**STRANGER 1** Also, we just like soup.

**VILLAGE ELDER** Thank you. Thank you for entering our village as strangers and leaving as friends.

*Strangers wave to Villagers and begin walking down center aisle.*

**STORYTELLER** The strangers waved to the villagers, who happily waved back. It wasn't until the strangers had reached the bend in the road that the Elder remembered his second question.

**VILLAGE ELDER** [*shouts*] Wait! Wait! Where did you get that magic stone?

*Strangers turn and act as if to shout back.*

**STORYTELLER** But the strangers had already rounded the bend in the road; their answer was caught by the wind, and carried into the treetops. The villagers never learned exactly where the strangers had found that magic stone. But over the years, the wisest among them realized that the stones were all around them, before their very eyes.

“We’re Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table,” *SLT*, 407

**LEADER** How shall we set the welcome table,  
inviting those who are hungry?

What might we share with those in need?

May we each find a way to be generous, in the coming days,  
and may we find equal reasons to be grateful for that which we receive.