

What if we already have enough?
Sermon 197 | Greystone Baptist Church | September 24, 2023
Matthew 13:31-33

There's an old European folk tale that dates back more than a hundred years. It shows up in France, Hungary, Russia, Portugal and Germany. Even though its different iterations sometimes come with different names, I learned it by the name of *Stone Soup*. There were many, many stories like this taught in the classrooms of my elementary school, but this one has taken up permanent residence in my mind because of its strangeness, its simplicity, and also its persistent applicability.

The story goes a little something like this:

A group of weary travelers make their way into a village where they know no one. Relying on the hospitality of strangers, they knock on doors asking for a place to stay the night. After hearing a round of no's from the villagers who didn't think they had anything extra to offer to these strange and weary travelers, they regrouped and decided that if they were to eat and sleep that night, they needed a different strategy.

Standing in the town square, one of the travelers says loudly, "If only we had a large pot, full of water, and a fire to put it on, then we could make for ourselves some delicious stone soup." Having heard the outrageous proclamation, the curiosity of a villager was piqued and they soon brought out a pot filled with water, and all the necessary supplies for building a fire. Another traveler, standing in the town square, took a stone, cleaned it, and placed it in the pot, now warming with water.

Their activities were starting to garner more and more attention from the townspeople as one of the travelers dipped her finger into the warm water and said, "Mmmmm, this *is* good, but you know, it needs a little onion." A villager heard of the need and realized they had just one onion to spare. So they ran home and hurried back with the onion to add to the soup. After adding the onion and tasting it again the traveler realized its flavor was improving but it still needed something... a carrot perhaps? A villager heard of the need and realized they had just one spare carrot in the pantry at home. So they ran home and hurried back with the carrot to add to the soup.

The process repeated itself for quite a while as each taste gave way to another specific need. As the soup cooked all kinds of ingredients were added, things like potatoes, salt, cabbage, butter, meat, tomatoes, celery, and the list went on and on. By the end of the night, the smell was wonderful and the pot was so full it was almost overflowing. At this point, the travelers tasted the soup again and declared it was finally ready.

With more than enough soup to feed the whole town, the travelers served everyone who lived in the village. And to repay them for cooking the meal and feeding the whole town, the villagers found room to house them after all.¹

Creatio ex nihilo! As the old doctrine would say... *something created from nothing*. Or would the contradictory philosophy *ex nihilism nihil fit* win the day, *nothing comes from nothing*? Were the makings of that fine soup there all along? Were they kept from the travelers on purpose? Or were they just obscured by a certain, limited or should we say limit-ing perspective?

Like the parables of Jesus, this old European folktale may seem simple at first, but upon a second look, seems to produce more questions than answers.

This is exactly what we find in Matthew's 13th chapter. The whole thing is filled with parables about the Kingdom of Heaven. First the one about a sower, then the weeds and the wheat, and finally the mustard seed and the yeast, each short story teasing our minds awake with questions about this Kingdom that Jesus proclaims to be imminent.

While closer examination of each parable might yield more specific clues as to what this Kingdom actually looks like, the one sweeping truth that we can deduce from the whole collection of parables is this: *things are not as they seem*.

While the first two parables include images of grandeur: A sower who scatters a multitude of seeds across a broad terrain of land with more than enough to guarantee *something* of value will grow. And a field large enough to warrant laborers to work it, produces a crop of weeds and wheat, enough of each to be tied into bundles before deciding their fate.

While these first two parables paint a picture of grandeur, the next pair present a quite different scenario. Here the sower appears to be holding, almost cradling a single, tiny mustard seed in their hand, carefully placing it in just the right spot, in fertile and protected soil. Then that soil nurtures it to grow until one day the sower looks upon it with new perspective and maybe even a little surprise as they discover that this solitary seed has become a home, a resting place, a sanctuary (if you will) for all the birds of the air.

Then, in the same way a single woman in the privacy of her own kitchen takes three measures of flour (that's about 60 lbs or enough for about 60 loaves of bread) and works in enough yeast - yeast which at the granular level is almost impossible to see with the naked eye but when combined with other yeast particles, flour, water, salt, and the right measure of time, can produce enough airy and risen bread to feed the whole town.

I have always loved the thirteenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel. I love the outrageous and almost irresponsible generosity displayed by the first sower who, early in the chapter, recklessly tosses seeds all over the place as if there is nothing to lose and no shortage in

¹ <https://www.twinkl.com/teaching-wiki/stone-soup-story>

sight. And I have always loved that a story about a single woman, standing in her kitchen making bread, made it into the cannon. As much as I have loved these parables and returned to them time and time again - I saw something new this time.

That's the beauty of the parable, you know, each time you come to it, you notice something different, you see a different perspective, you ask a different question, and in so doing, the hope is, we learn a little something new about God's Kingdom.

This time it hit me that even though the first two parables tell stories of abundance, it is this second pair that paint pictures of provision. The bread produced in a home kitchen, kneaded by the hands of a single baker, is enough to feed an entire community. A single solitary mustard seed provides a home, a resting place, a sanctuary for *all* the birds of the air.

These conclusions are not made for the first two parables - even as their production would seem to surpass that which is taking place in these small-scale stories. And so I have to wonder, if for us, a people for whom bigger is always better, and small is never enough... I wonder if for us, in addition to the first being last and last being first, is the Gospel trying to teach us that in God's kingdom the small is large, and large is small?

And if this is so..., we also may begin to wonder... though we feel like we are operating in scarcity... *What if we already have enough?*

It can be so easy to think about all that we do not have, or all that we wish we had, but what if this has become our limiting perspective? The lens through which we view our lives and our ability to become more generous people - like the initial perspective of the locals in the story about Stone Soup who didn't think they had anything to share.

What if we already have enough, but we just can't see it because the problems that present themselves seem too overwhelming, too complex, too out of our personal control? But what if we began to see through the parabolic lens that the Gospel is offering us today, a new perspective that suggests even the tiniest mustard seed - when planted, rooted, nurtured, and fed by sun, soil, and water - (even the tiniest seed) can become a beautiful sanctuary.

What if we already have enough - but we just need to root our gifts in the ground of community, where they can join and be nurtured alongside the seemingly small gifts that others have to offer - What if together our smaller gifts could grow into a larger gift, one that looks like the Kingdom of Heaven and becomes a safe place for *all* who are looking for welcome, respite, and love?

What if we already have enough?

And you know, another thing kind of hit me this time as I was looking at these parables again... There is a great measure of faith required to give when you don't think you have enough. It is the contrast in the two sowers that animates this realization today.

When we imagine the first sower, scattering seed on all kinds of soil we have to imagine that sower has more seeds stored up somewhere, that's the only logical reason that they might sow so freely and liberally. So it is when we imagine the most generous givers in our lives. Only the wealthy can give a gift that makes a difference, ...we think. Or, maybe after I get that promotion or raise I've been working for, then I'll become a more generous person. *If we had more, we could give more... or at least that's what we tell ourselves.*

In contrast to the first sower, perhaps we resonate more with the second. Holding on tightly to the one small seed we have in our possession. Knowing full well how hard we worked for it, the time it took, how much it means to us, and how good it feels just to hold it in our hands. (Pause)... perhaps then we also know how hard it is to let it go, to plant it in the ground and to trust the soil, water, and sun to do their work.

But then, one has to wonder, *What kind of sower, giver, baker, or steward is God calling us to become?*

Today we begin a series on stewardship. And it comes at a time when we are dealing with our own feelings of scarcity. Each month we, like so many other churches and charitable organizations, look at our budgets and wonder if we are going to have enough.

Will we have enough to maintain *this* campus, these grounds, this sanctuary which is a resting place to all who call North Raleigh home? Will we have enough to give to our mission partners and help to support their work in our community? Will we have enough to support and grow our own mission and ministry here - building a faith community where all are welcome, where all are loved, where all are invited to come and see a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven breaking through?

Will we have enough? We want to know...

But I want to encourage us to shift our perspective a bit, because *that* is what the parables urge us to do... and I want us to ask it a different way... Instead of "Will we have enough?" I wonder....

What if we already have enough?

What if we just haven't yet recognized our tiny seed or spoonful of yeast...our solitary carrot, our single onion, our large empty pot, our vacant and unadorned guest room... What if we just haven't yet seen how our smallest resource could possibly make a difference? But what if all we need to do is sow our single tiny seed in the soil of community, trusting God and one another to provide the other ingredients needed to make a delicious soup, a large and impressive tree, and enough bread to feed the whole neighborhood?

What if we already have enough?

We're just waiting on the courage to give and the faith to know that with God, the smallest gifts, are so often the largest. For with God, even a small little seed can become a magnificent sanctuary.