

Stone Soup
A Fantasy in Two Acts
Rev. Jennifer Brooks¹
Nov. 1, 2009

We know the story of Stone Soup, and we're told it is a medieval folk tale about soldiers on their long way home from war.²

Today I share with you the little-known origins of this story, which was a folk tale long before medieval times. It begins with a challenge to an itinerant Jewish teacher. In one village he was discussing the "greatest law." It was well-known: "To love god with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself."³

Then the challenge came. A lawyer asked: "Who is my neighbor?"

This is a trick question. Try to define who your neighbor is. Very soon it's necessary to enlist surveyors and start measuring boundaries, saying who lives here and there and there. It's easy to get lost in legalisms whenever we try to define a term everybody thinks they understand, a term so common that in fact it has no precise meaning.

So "Who is my neighbor?" is a trick question, one intended to draw Yeshua away from the broad principle, the point he was trying to make about what was basic and needful in how we live our lives. To answer it, to define "neighbor" in the way of law and legalisms, would trap Yeshua and obscure his message.

Yeshua did not even try to answer the question. Instead he told a story. I think we all know it.

It is the story of a man on the Jerusalem road who was set upon by thieves, beaten and robbed and stripped of everything of value, even his clothes. He lay there on the side of the road, bleeding into the dust, and along came a priest and a Levite, one after the other, and they passed by on the other side.

Then—and this is like a fairy tale, is it not?—then a third man came along who did not pass by on the other side. The third man, the one who stopped to help, was a Samaritan.

Today we say "Good Samaritan" as an accolade. It is praiseworthy to be a Good Samaritan, to do a good deed. Yet in the time and place where Yeshua was telling the story, to be called a Samaritan was an insult.

So we can guess that he deliberately chose for the hero of his story a man whose ethnicity was an insult if applied to anyone who was listening. Everyone in the crowd was bound to go away thinking that if a Samaritan could be a hero, well, maybe I could be a hero too.

¹ Minister, Second Congregational Meeting House Society, Unitarian Universalist, Nantucket, MA. *This sermon is subject to a Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivatives-Noncommercial License 3.0. For more information, go to <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>. This sermon is the seventh in an annual sermon series on the Good Samaritan ("Good Samaritan 7").*

² Marcia Brown's well-known version of the story is *Stone Soup* (Atheneum, First Ed. 1947).

³ "Parable of the Good Samaritan," Luke 10:25-37 (Christian Scriptures, New Standard Revised Version 1995). The "greatest law" to which Jesus refers is found in Deuteronomy 4:29 and 10:12.

And, you know, it worked. The story crosses all cultural boundaries. Folk tales and fairy tales everywhere talk about the first two who pass on the other side, who refuse to help. Then along comes the third—it might be the third son, or the third young girl, or the third passer-by of whatever kind, and that third one stops and offers help (and usually there is a big reward).

But when Yeshua told the story of the Good Samaritan, he did not mention a reward. He was not recounting a folk tale with fairies and magic. Instead he was answering a challenging question by changing the way his listeners thought. So the end of the story is just that the Samaritan helped the injured traveler. We never find out if the traveler is a prince in disguise, or a wealthy merchant, or someone else who might make the good deed “pay off.” In this respect the story might be considered rather disappointing.

But just as the listeners are wondering, *What about the reward*, Yeshua turns back to the lawyer and says, “Tell me, which of these was *neighbor* to this man?” At this point the lawyer may well have forgotten it was his question that started Yeshua down the road to Jerusalem (so to speak). Instead the lawyer is wondering what he would do if he found a bleeding man on the road, and hoping (rather doubtfully) that he would stop to help, and not pass by on the other side.

This parable is good that way; it has the power to make people stop in their tracks and think about whether they would behave well under difficult circumstances.

So the lawyer is caught off guard (an unusual thing for a lawyer) and he almost says, “Would you repeat the question?” the way he did in law school when the professor caught him napping; but he catches himself just in time. He thinks rapidly, “*Which of these was a neighbor?*” and he sees (with great relief) that the answer is obvious, and gives it: “The one who helped him.” Notice that the lawyer, in that time and place, cannot bring himself to say “the Samaritan” as we might today. He says “The one who helped him.”

And Yeshua nods approvingly. The lawyer has done well. The lawyer glows with pride. Then Yeshua says to him, and to everyone, “Go and do likewise.”

And that’s the end. The lawyer, and all the people listening—no one is quibbling anymore about “Who is my neighbor.” While caught up in the story, they had an unexpected insight about how to live their lives. They are done with quibbling. Instead they are thinking about the kind of life they want to create. “They promise themselves to go along that famous road of meeting, and to do likewise: that is, to make themselves neighbors of the neighbors they meet.”⁴

Everyone knows that *first* part of the story. I say “that first part of the story” because it is only the first act. The second act is more than a thousand years later. What we are not told, and what I reveal to you for the first time today, is that the lawyer who was so tricky, and then so swept up in the story that he thought for a moment he was back in a law school classroom—that lawyer did not lead an ordinary life. No.

⁴ The phrase “make themselves neighbors of the neighbors they meet” is Dr. François Bovon’s. In his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Bovon says that after hearing the parable of the Good Samaritan, the listeners “promise themselves to go along that famous road of meeting, and to do likewise: that is, to make themselves neighbors of the neighbors they meet.” Dr. Bovon is Frothingham Professor of the History of Religion at Harvard Divinity School. *L’Évangile selon saint Luc* (9,51-14,35) (Commentaire du Nouveau Testament, IIIb), Genève, Labor et Fides, 1996.

He and two others from that crowd (as it happens, a priest and a Levite) fell in together and went through life as comrades, as companions on the road, doing this and that and arguing philosophy and wondering whether they would act like heroes if there ever came a time when they found a bleeding man by the side of the road. I cannot tell you all of their adventures together (for they did have adventures); but when the time came to act like heroes, each one separately, they did do the right thing. Then there came a time when events invited them to act together as heroes, and again they behaved with generosity and courage. And they lived this way for a very long time.

They lived longer, in fact, than anyone thinks of living. After more than a thousand years of traveling the world and doing good deeds and getting themselves and others out of this or that bad situation, one day they walked down a road in medieval France, weary and hungry. They came upon a village of frightened people; a village of people who hid their limited supply of food and barred their doors against hungry soldiers who arrive at dusk.

If we think about the story of the Good Samaritan, it might seem at first that the weary travelers are the strangers bleeding by the side of the road, the “neighbors” who are to be loved and helped. And this is so; these comrades who were present when Yeshua first created the parable had come to understand that part of their mission was: Offer themselves as “in need” and *see what happens*.

Almost as soon as they arrive, the three comrades perceive that these villagers are not Good Samaritans. The travelers may be tired and hungry, but the villagers themselves are even more in need of help, a deeper kind of help. It is a pattern the travelers have seen many times before.

They are experienced enough that they have no real need to consult one another. Instead, they begin immediately to act as Good Samaritans to the villagers; they “make themselves neighbors of the neighbors they meet.” And, like Yeshua answering a question with a seemingly unconnected story, they do something so bizarre and unexpected that it lifts the villagers up out of their close attention to their own needs. The travelers begin making soup from stones.

In their curiosity and amazement, the villagers forget their fear. In that moment of surprise, of *openness*, the villagers become able to participate in the soup-making. And through a community effort to make the soup “extra good,”⁵ each villager receives more than if the meal were prepared at home, alone.

The villager who has potatoes could, alone, have potato soup, but by participating has a sustaining stew filled with many other vegetables and even some meat. The villager who has been hoarding meat might, alone, have enough protein, but die of scurvy; but by participating benefits from the vegetables others bring. All the villagers benefit from the enormous satisfaction that each feels in making a contribution—from adding something to the pot.

And there is another thing: they feel *gratitude* toward each other and to the three strangers who have led the way. The travelers know the secret of Stone Soup and are not afraid to share it. The secret is not in the “secret recipe” or some hidden magic of the stones; the secret is in the decision to act as neighbors to one another.

⁵ Marcia Brown’s phraseology, in her 1947 re-telling of the story. See note 2.

Who acts as *neighbor*? Those who can. Why can they? Because they understand love. They love themselves, and they know how to act from that love: how to act as neighbors to the neighbors they meet.

Anyone who has ever played that blanket-toss game where lots of people stand holding the edges of a blanket until it is stretched tight, so that a person in the middle can be thrown up and down, can understand both the parable of the Good Samaritan and the story “Stone Soup.” In the blanket toss game, the person in the middle benefits from all the people who participate by holding onto the blanket’s edges. Everyone holding the blanket turns their eyes toward the center of the blanket and they all act in concert to toss the person safely up and down. There is laughter, there are smiles, there are happy glances exchanged across the circle.

And when one person has had a turn at bouncing in the middle, he or she rolls cheerfully off the blanket and takes a spot along the edge, so that someone else can enjoy the fun of being tossed gently by a circle of affectionate co-conspirators. Like stone soup, the blanket toss is not possible unless everyone lends a hand. No one person is the sole beneficiary. The whole community benefits.

This business of acting as “neighbor,” acting with love toward others, really does have its roots in loving oneself, because being a loving contributor to the community is an act of self-love. In pragmatic terms, it can be described as enlightened self-interest, but it usually emerges from people who value themselves. “Who is my neighbor?”—“Who *acted* as neighbor?” At this level of analysis both questions become: Do you love?

When we live out of a place of love rather than fear, we see opportunities for loving action when they arise: we find ourselves in the right place at the right time, and we seize the opportunity. The power to act as neighbor is within each of us, awaiting only a change in our vision, a change in our internal posture: the activation of that inner compass always pointing north. Then the outflowing of love is automatic and in some fundamental way not a choice.

Everyone has times when fear or the inward-turning of vision impedes the ability to act, to respond to opportunities when they present themselves. And, you know, we shouldn’t berate ourselves when this happens. Each of us needs a turn in the center of the blanket, to be a recipient of the efforts of others. Once we are restored, when we again know that we are loved and loveable, we are able to seize the edge of the blanket and help lift others.

It’s important to remember that each of us lives constantly with love *and* with fear. Our hearts harbor both. The struggle is to set aside the fear and live from the love. Sometimes it takes the actions of others to help us, and sometimes we won’t be able to do it. But it’s important to try; to live with an open heart and outward vision; and it gets easier with practice.

Think of the villagers in the story “Stone Soup.” They were stuck in their fear. The mythical travelers had long experience with people like these villagers, and knew how to encourage them to act like neighbors. The villagers just needed a nudge in the right direction. After that night in the village, the travelers leave. The villagers, having participated in making Stone Soup, know how it feels to be neighborly. The next time an opportunity to act as a neighbor presents itself, they will find it easier to respond.

It might be said that after one night of Stone Soup, the villagers love themselves a bit more; they have just a bit more confidence that acting to help others is also good for themselves. If they can remember those feelings, they can live from the neighborly place in their hearts, the part that says: “Giving is good for us all.”

Of course there may be danger. There may be hard times. The villagers may *rightly* be afraid.

But if they tell and re-tell the story of “Stone Soup”; if they tell it to their children, to each other, and (in the silence of the night, when worries come to them and keep them from sleep) if they tell it to themselves—then they can remember how it felt. They can remember that acting as a neighbor is simply a very good way to live. Because they did tell and re-tell the story, we today know it as an old French folk tale, and we tell it to our children, and to each other, and to ourselves in the darkest hours of the night.

But what about the three travelers in the folk tale, the comrades who were there in the crowd when Yeshua first told the story?

Keep an eye out. You may meet them on the road. Perhaps some of us have already met them...because they are still traveling, still looking for ways to make neighbors of the neighbors they meet.

Go and do likewise.