

January 9, 2022 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Acts 8:4–14, 18–22](#)

TITLE: **Something Money Can't Buy**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

I'm going to start today with two parables—the Parable of the River King and the Parable of Stone Soup. Once upon a time there was a king who controlled a mighty river that flowed across a wide continent. The king should have a name—so we'll call him Jeff. I suppose he needs a last name, something unusual that could not be construed in court to be libel at all, so we'll call him Jeff Bezosman. One day King Jeff Bezosman, or King Jeff, had a brilliant idea. From his mighty palace in the north, he sent out courtiers across the land with the message that he wanted to build a second Palace of Profit somewhere in his kingdom. It would be huge and greatly enrich whatever village granted him access to build there. The chieftains and mayors of over 200 villages lusted after this prize offered by King Jeff. They put together presentations about why they were the best. They laid before the courtiers elaborate spreads of local delicacies, tax breaks, free real estate, and municipal underwriting to lure King Jeff to their village. They outbid their sisters and brothers in other villages, going so far as to expose their neighbors' secrets and liabilities so that King Jeff's favor would shine upon them. In the end, King Jeff built his Palace of Profit where he'd always intended to build it—near the kingdom's eastern capital city, so that he could continue to influence the elected officials who pass the laws affecting the flow of commerce on his mighty river. But now King Jeff knew about all the villages in the land—having confidential information handed to him for free so he could tailor his future business decisions to maximize his personal profit. And thus he rejoiced greatly as he sat on his throne in his great palace of the north.¹

Stone Soup: Once upon a time an old woman sat in the village square stirring a caldron of hot water with nothing in it but a stone. Curious passers-by came along and asked what she was making and she said “stone soup.” They were surprised and skeptical—and eventually offered their contributions, whatever they could spare to make the soup more tasty: a cabbage, an onion, a bit of broth, a lamb neck bone, a handful of salt, an old carrot. Soon there was a rich stew that fed the whole village that started from a single stone.

Chef Gabrielle Hamilton recently wrote that “stone soup” is the inspiration for the family meals her staff prepares at her restaurant. The people in the kitchen needed to eat too, and the cooks assigned to create this meal usually didn't have a menu to work with. They would do a quick scan of the refrigerator and noted that a carton of green beans was starting to fade. Now it seemed impossible to feed the entire staff from a pile of sorry looking green beans, but then the cook went around to the other colleagues and begged for a few scraps: some cooked potatoes, a handful of sliced shallots, maybe some cod scraps from the chef butchering fish for that evening's entrees. The chef kept hunting around in the pantry, perhaps finding a can of white beans or diced tomatoes, a pint of dry lentils, a few extra eggs. Soon something that started with an item as unappetizing as a stone turned into a wonderful meal for all the staff to enjoy.²

Two stories—two models of how to live and interact in God’s world. I share these stories as a reminder of a simple truth: The Christian gospel is not meant to champion the status quo, but to challenge it. Our faith is not meant to encourage the way things are but rather to offer an alternative to the way things are done. A life-giving, life-changing alternative. Now this is something you expect a preacher to say. We hear these words intellectually but do we take them in emotionally? Do we really take them to heart? And if not, is there something we can do to move this faith from up here (head) to “in here” (heart)? Yes, there is.

Philip was a leader in the early church—a deacon who cared for those in need but also a gifted preacher telling the story of Jesus Christ. He traveled to the land north of Jerusalem—the villages of the Samaritans, people who believed in God and the basic teachings of the Old Testament, but who had intermarried over the years and didn’t put stock in the religious leadership in Jerusalem. Thus they were despised by the Jews in Judea. But Philip had great success preaching in Samaria. There were healings and visions and great joy in hearing about the kingdom of God drawing near in Christ—this alternative gospel built not around laws and rituals but around love and resurrection.

Hearing about Philip’s success, two of the apostles, Peter and John, left Jerusalem and traveled to Samaria to see for themselves and offer support for this young faith community. While there, people were baptized and blessed by the Holy Spirit. The scripture uses the language of “receiving the Holy Spirit” as a way to capture the dramatic changes in these Samaritan believers. They were transformed, ecstatic; even more so, they were now united with others in a way that had been impossible before accepting baptism in the name of Christ. Something bigger than gender or nationality or language or prestige was at work in their lives. A new way of living had taken hold of them.

Now interspersed with that narrative is a second story involving a traveling magician and wonderworker named Simon. He’d earned his living offering fake cures and psychosomatic healings throughout Samaria when he encountered the gospel of Christ in Philip’s preaching. To his credit, he accepted this gospel and was baptized. To his discredit, Simon thought he could buy the gift of the Holy Spirit from Peter and John—that he could possess this ability to fill lives with joy and purpose and healing power. For that error, Simon was severely chastised by Peter and begged for forgiveness. Some things money just can’t buy.

Again, so far there is nothing earth-shattering in this sermon. King Jeff seeking ever greater mounds of personal wealth vs. the model of stone soup feeding a village or a hungry kitchen staff in a restaurant. Philip preaching a message of hope to people long despised and kept on the margins. One man tries to buy this message for personal gain and is rebuked while others are baptized and rejoice in newly-washed lives of purpose and inner peace.

I wasn't sure how to make this message relevant to our lives today until I read an article given to me by a church member - an essay written by the English poet and novelist Paul Kingsnorth. Kingsnorth came to Christian faith both reluctantly yet deeply as an adult, and he described this process in an essay called "The Cross and the Machine." He had always been a man of strong passions and convictions, especially around environmental issues. But at some point he realized that his activism was not enough. As he put it, if you "dig long enough, you see that something like climate change or mass extinction is not a 'problem' to be 'solved' through politics or technology or science; [rather] it is the manifestation of a deep spiritual malaise."³ He argued that every crisis of culture is ultimately a crisis of spirit. We can go about our days as functional atheists—believing that fundamental answers can be found in science, in economics, in industrial profits, in building up our military or protecting our borders, in ravaging nature for our needs, wants and desires. Yet isn't it clear by now that all such efforts are leading to disaster? As Kingsnorth put it, in this false kingdom of ours, our seas are ribboned with plastic, forests are burning, cities bulge with billionaires and tented cities for the homeless. It is all, as he said, the expression of a spiritual malaise.

The famous psychiatrist Carl Jung once wrote this: *During the past 30 years, I have treated hundreds of patients. Among those in the second half of life, there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. They had lost that which the living religions of every age have given to their followers; and none of them has been really healed who did not regain a religious outlook.*⁴

The world offers us its daily parables about the meaning of life. It's there on TikTok and Facebook, embedded in pop-up ads and network commercials. It's a story about kings and palaces of profits; about red vs. blue villagers. In time we learn that such stories are not life-giving. So we become activists. We read, we join, we click on links and share them on Twitter. We march; we lobby; we band together and occasionally win; we also grow weary and wonder if change will ever come. It's then that we need to hear what Philip is saying to us—that at the heart of it all is a story about persistent human rebellion and God's invitation to come home. The gospel is a different story. It includes limits that are not shaped by our desires, but also a heaven-sent vision where all are fed, all are welcome. It includes a cross—a saying "no" to what we believed was worthy of our "yes" so that something truer, deeper, more perfect might come to be.

The symbol of all this is both simple and profound—the sacrament of baptism. Think about it: You come forward, renouncing one world and accepting another—rejecting one king while accepting a Savior who's not on a throne but a cross. Some people of faith have argued that baptism is only for adults, too special a sacrament to be squandered on babies. Others have insisted that life is too precious to withhold this water from even the youngest of God's creatures. Both are wrong if they use their theologies to keep one another apart; both are right if they see in this act something that changes everything—something freely offered to each of us, something money can't buy.

In a moment I'll invite you to reaffirm your baptism vows. (And if you've never been baptized, we should talk.) In the vows is a "No" to the dominant story of the world and a

“Yes” to the mystery and wonder of the gospel of Christ. You’re not meant to fully understand it. You’re invited simply to remember being washed, being named, and being willing to walk by faith with God’s help. So first, let’s pause for a moment to breathe—to let go—and then do the most radical thing possible this Sunday morning: remember our baptisms.

¹ Cf. Fulfillment: Winning and Losing in One-Click America, by Alec MacGillis; cited by Chris Iosco in book review, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, December 6, 2021.

² Gabrielle Hamilton, “What Stone Soup Means to a Seasoned Chef,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 15, 2021, p. 21.

³ “The Cross and the Machine,” Paul Kingsnorth, *First Things*, June 2021.

⁴ C.G. Jung, Modern Man in Search of a Soul, p. 279.