

Sermon “Three Cups of Tea-Servanthood” Mark 10:35-45; Sunday, Oct. 18, 2009 Salem United Church of Christ, Denver, CO

What is it that you think motivated the sons of Thunder, James and John, to approach Jesus and ask to sit at his left and right side? Hadn't they been listening to all that Jesus has been saying to the disciples up to this lesson? He has told them that following him means thinking of themselves as people who put the others first, remain humble and dependent on God, don't play games of one-upmanship, relinquish control for who does what and how they do it or give up trying to be the one who is God's quality control experts which is “control freak” for anything that's done for God; a disciple keeps children at the center of the work, and don't become overburdened by possessions.

Now they come and ask for special recognition. What they failed to do was drink from the “cup” that Jesus was offering them (v. 38). And their glib answer that they were able to drink of the cup from which Jesus drank suggests that they thought it was going to be filled with royal wine.

Several of us attended the motivational workshop this past Tuesday. It was filled with some inspiring speakers including General Colin Powell, Zig Zigler, Rev. Robert Schuller of Crystal Cathedral fame, Laura Bush, and Tamara Lowe. Those of us heard them all came away with different impressions, but all with the understanding that behind all the successes and accomplishments is the movement of the still speaking God, and the responses of humility and a willingness to serve.

Last week, as we gathered to celebrate our 125th anniversary, we were energized and challenged by Rev. David Popham to continue to be a tree that offers shade to those in need in this part of Denver and to put our roots deep. He listed some of the service/servant works that are offered here at Salem: the scouting program, community meal, food pantry, Crop Walk, Community garden, mission trips, educational programs. Salem has undertaken on a one to one relationship concern for people who have mental illnesses and work with them one to one.

That is what Greg Mortenson does too. He is the author of the best selling book, Three Cups of Tea. He took Jesus' injunction to love your neighbor as your yourself, seriously. Born in 1957, Mortenson joined the U.S. Army as a young man and was trained as a medical corpsman. That, coupled with a love of adventure, later led to Mortenson being included on mountain-climbing teams, which were always eager to have a medic along.

In 1993, he was part of a team ascending the world's second-highest mountain, only slightly lower than Everest. That peak, known only by its map coordinates as K2, is part of the Karakoram segment of the Himalayas. It's located on the border between Pakistan and China. Informally, K2 is known as “The Savage Peak” due to the difficulty of climbing it. For every four people who reach the summit, one dies trying to get there.

All climbers want to get to the top of the mountains they tackle, but in Mortenson's case, he had an additional incentive. The previous year, his 23-year-old sister, Christa, had died from a massive seizure after a lifelong struggle with epilepsy. Mortenson intended to dedicate his conquest of K2 to her memory.

After 78 days of struggle against the mountain, which included helping rescue another climber, Mortenson got to within 600 meters of the summit. But then failing strength and altitude sickness forced him to turn back. A local guide helped him off the mountain, but they got separated when Mortenson made a wrong turn. He ended up in the primitive mountain village of Korphe in Pakistan. Too sick to go on, he stayed there under the hospitable care of the villagers while he recuperated.

The people of Korphe belong to an ethnic group called Balti. Many of them, like the more well-known Sherpas of Tibet, work as high-altitude porters for climbing expeditions. But one important difference between the two groups is that the Sherpas are Buddhists and the Baltis are Muslims.

While in the village, Mortenson observed the harsh realities of the Balti way of life. They live in isolated, remote mountain valleys and subsist on marginal crops of grain and small herds of yaks. Because of the altitude, the climate is severe. Medical care is almost nonexistent, and people die from things that would be routinely treated and cured in other places — even other places in Pakistan. Among the Balti, children under 12 months of age have a 35 percent mortality rate, primarily due to diarrhea-induced dehydration. During the brutal winters, villagers retreat into tiny basement dugouts and spend six months huddled together, barely kept warm by smoky yak-dung fires.

For the children who do survive, there are often no schools. In Korphe, Mortenson saw 82 kids kneeling on frosty ground in the open, trying to learn. The Pakistani government provided no teacher, and the villagers couldn't afford one on their own. They shared a teacher with a neighboring village, but he was in Korphe only three days a week. The rest of the time, the kids gathered in the open to work on the lessons the teacher had assigned.

Though Mortenson had no money and no idea how to raise any, he resolved to build a school for the village. When he returned to California, he took a job as an emergency room nurse and started sending letters to celebrities and anyone he could think of who might help with the school. That attempt failed, but eventually a man who'd made a good bit of money in the semiconductor industry (and was also a climber) read about Mortenson's quest in a climbers' newsletter. That man contacted Mortenson and donated the necessary money. Mortenson then went back to Pakistan, purchased building materials and rode in a trunk to get them near Korphe. From there, Mortenson had to solve the considerable problem of getting the materials to the remote mountain village while fending off tribal chieftains and others who tried to shuttle the supplies toward their own uses.

The people of Korphe themselves solved the final part of the logistical problem. A rock slide had blocked the road some 18 miles away. The men of the community, accustomed to hauling heavy loads on their backs for climbing expeditions, moved the materials that same way. One photo in Mortenson's book shows the men with massive loads of lumber on their backs, laboring toward their village ... with great smiles on their faces.

During this ordeal, the Balti and other Pakistanis became convinced that Mortenson had no ulterior motives and had come to do only good.

After Mortenson's school was built and his promise was kept, he returned to the States but continued to be haunted by the needs he'd seen in the mountain villages. To make a long story

short, Mortenson resumed raising money so he could help other villages build schools. He kept returning to Pakistan, and eventually to Afghanistan as well, to build more schools. As of last year, he and the organization he founded had established more than 78 schools in rural and often volatile regions of the two countries. He not only constructed the buildings but often paid for teachers and learning materials, too. Those schools provide education to more than 28,000 children (including 18,000 girls) in regions where few opportunities existed before.

Mortenson hasn't profited financially from all this. Although he now draws a salary from his organization, it's small. He has faced considerable dangers, including an eight-day armed kidnapping by a Taliban group. It eventually let him go after becoming convinced of his good intentions. (Some fighters even gave him money for the schools.) In 2003, Mortenson escaped a firefight between feuding Afghan warlords by hiding for eight hours under a load of putrid animal hides. He has been the target of two fatwas from Islamic mullahs who didn't like his helping girls receive an education, has been investigated by the CIA and, after 9/11, received hate mail and even death threats from Americans for helping Muslim children receive an education.

But by his dogged efforts, his selfless actions and his willingness to meet people where they are without trying to impose on them some other agenda, Mortenson has gained the trust of Islamic leaders, government officials, military commanders and tribal chiefs in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. They see him as a humble hero.

What's more, many observers on both sides of the Atlantic believe that in the long run, it's efforts such as his to build bridges instead of fight battles that will help reduce terrorism throughout the world.

The second thing Greg Mortensen's story is about and which Jesus teaches us by modeling is the need for humility.

I like the story of a strong young man at a construction site was bragging that he could outdo anyone in a feat of strength. He made a special case of making fun of Morris, an older workman. After several minutes, Morris had enough. "Why don't you put your money where your mouth is?" he said. "I will bet a week's wages that I can haul something in a wheelbarrow over to that outbuilding that you won't be able to wheel back."

"You're on, old man," the braggart replied. "It's a bet! Let's see what you got."

Morris reached out and grabbed the wheelbarrow by the handles. Then, nodding to the young man, he said, "All right. Get in."

In his book, after a longer-than-expected trip home to America, Mortenson returned to Korphe, the site of his first school building. He was frustrated at the slow progress of construction during his absence, so he took charge as construction manager. Mortenson went to the building site on the edge of town every morning and didn't leave until sunset. He used a level and plumb line to check the straightness of the walls, and in a notebook he carefully kept track of each rupee spent. This went on all summer, but progress was still frustratingly slow.

One day in August, Haji Ali, the village leader, arrived at the site and took Mortenson aside to ask of him one more favor. Mortenson was more than willing to accommodate his Balti mentor. So Haji Ali, taking the level, plumb line and notebook out of Mortenson's hands, said to him,

“Sit down. And shut your mouth. You’re making everyone crazy.” He brought Mortenson down to his home in the village and had his wife prepare butter tea for the two of them.

Then Haji said to him, “If you want to thrive in Baltistan, you must respect our ways. The first time you share tea with a Balti, you are a stranger. The second time you take tea, you are an honored guest. The third time you share a cup of tea you become family, and for our family, we are prepared to do anything, even die,” he said, placing his hand on Mortenson’s own. “Doctor Greg, you must make time to share three cups of tea. We may be uneducated. But we are not stupid. We have lived and survived here for a long time.”

Mortenson recalls, “That day, Haji Ali taught me the most important lesson I’ve ever learned in my life. We Americans think you have to accomplish everything quickly. We’re the country of 30-minute power lunches and two-minute football drills. Our leaders thought their ‘shock-and-awe’ campaign could end the war in Iraq before it even started. Haji Ali taught me to share three cups of tea, to slow down and make building relationships as important as building projects. He taught me that I had more to learn from the people I work with than I could ever hope to teach them.”

Three weeks later, with Mortenson demoted from foreman to spectator, the school walls had risen higher than his head. The only task that remained was putting on the roof.

May we also in our personal lives, in our relationships, in the church, be aware that the Spirit of God is leading and guiding us. We do need to remember that our actions, words, expressions are important and can move people. We want to build up and sometimes we need to be reminded like Greg was, that we can hurt the very efforts we are working on.

Children’s Chat

Invite a man and a woman from the congregation to sit on either side of in front of the children. Hold a microphone and say that you’re going to quiz these two church members. Ask each adult the following questions: “Name the three wealthiest people in the world. Name the last three Heisman Trophy winners. Name the last three winners of the Miss America contest.” They probably won’t do very well, and the point is that money, trophies and beauty prizes aren’t very important. Then ask the two church members: “Name a few teachers who aided your journey through school. Name three friends who have helped you through a difficult time. Name three people who have made you feel appreciated and special.” The church members probably won’t have any trouble coming up with these names. The point is that the people who make a difference in your life are the ones who care and the ones who serve. Emphasize that Jesus knew this, which is why he told his followers, “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant” (Mark 10:43). Tell the children that the path to greatness is through service to others, and encourage them to be great by helping others and making them feel appreciated and special.