

“Three Cups of Humble Tea”

Luke 3:1-6

If Greg Mortenson is motivated to do good deeds by the example of Jesus, you wouldn't know it by reading his book, which I did while on sabbatical. He not only makes no mention of such motivation, he makes no mention of Jesus, at least not as having anything to do with Mortenson himself. Although his parents were Lutheran missionaries in Tanzania, where Mortenson grew up, he makes no claim that he shares their faith.

Yet, if you wanted an example of someone who takes seriously Jesus' injunction not to be served but to serve, you would not go wrong looking at Mortenson.

But you'd likely have to look for him in a high-altitude neighborhood.

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.

As it worked out, he honored Christa with far-more-lasting results.

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 climber's newsletter. That man contacted Mortenson and donated the necessary money. Mortenson then went back to Pakistan, purchased building materials and rode in a truck 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 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, ever 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.

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. He wrote an article for Parade Magazine a couple of weeks ago, saying he's up to 96 schools.

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. And a good alternative to sending more American troops. This year the war in Afghanistan has cost American taxpayers \$30 billion. Can you imagine what would happen if we spent that kind of money on building schools and paying teachers in Afghanistan where 80% of the population is illiterate. If we want to win Afghanistan over to our ideals of freedom and democracy, educate the next generation. Instead of paying for bombs and soldiers, pay for schools and teachers.

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.

Again, Mortenson's book is called *Three Cups of Tea*, which refers to an old Balti proverb: "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 Mortenson has drunk a lot of tea in little villages throughout the world's most rugged and remote regions.

In our gospel text, John leaves the comforts of Jerusalem for the wilderness. He becomes "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." John prepares the way for the coming of Christ

just as we prepare the way for the coming of Christ during these Advent days.

We can't all be Greg Mortenson's preparing the way for education and peace in Pakistan and Afghanistan, but we can all be Jesus' disciples in our relationships with one another, seeking not to be served, but to serve.

#239 - Hark, the Glad Sound!