

“Responding to Grace”

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 21
The Reverend J. Stewart Hardy, Ph.D.

Saturday, August 22, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; Psalm 34:15-22;
Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Greg Mortenson was born in Minnesota and raised in Tanzania, where his parents served as missionaries – Lutheran missionaries, I might add – and teachers. This background and the experiences associated with it gave him a deep understanding of grace and the commitment to live it out in his life. He became a highly rated and respected ER trauma nurse; he was an active athlete; he took an avid interest in mountain climbing. So when the opportunity presented itself, he set off to climb K2, the second highest mountain on earth. He and the team with whom he climbed failed, right almost as they reached the summit.

For Mortenson the adventure was almost fatal. He descended the mountain broken and battered and stumbled into a small remote and desperately poor village in the war torn mountains of Pakistan's Karakoram Himalaya. The area was (and remains) a haven for Al Qaeda. There, much to his surprise and relief, he was provided home and healing by the villagers; it was for him an experience of pure grace. But that brought with it a problem: how best to respond?

Regaining his health, he experienced the impoverished villagers' life first hand. Daily he watched the young children squatting in the dry dust, scratching out their letters on the ground; it was the only schooling they knew. They had nowhere else to turn.

Which is somewhat the position that Simon Peter and the Twelve for whom he spoke, felt they were in. In the gospel as we have just heard it read, Jesus' teaching about His being the bread of life, about the necessity for people to eat his body and drink His blood, and His bold statement that those who did not do this would never enter God's kingdom, were next to overwhelming. They struggled with their reaction and response to Jesus' astonishing words. Faithful Jewish people were repulsed by them. The religious authorities were aghast at them. Why even some of His disciples were convinced that he had just gone too far. His demands were extreme and bizarre, and so they turned away and ceased to follow Him.

Which opened the questions – How were the Twelve to respond to Jesus? What were they to do? Noticing their unease, Jesus asked them if they too were thinking of abandoning Him. It is here, beloved, is it not, that we find ourselves in the company of Mortenson and the Twelve? How exactly are we to respond, not only to God's grace poured out on us in so many amazing ways, but how are we really to understand Jesus' shocking statements and the demands He makes about faithfully following Him? Is this Jesus really believable? Or do we just skip over what's being said in this morning's gospel? Or do we just walk away shrugging our shoulders and raising our hands?

Which, of course, brings us to the question of why do some people believe? Why do some give up believing? And why is it that some never believe? Which in turn brings us to the question we ask ourselves, I think, from time to time: “Do I believe – do I really believe?” Or, in milder form, “Do I believe enough? Do I believe correctly? Have I got it right?”

At first it may appear to us to be shocking that the gospel would openly admit to the reality of such questions. But you see, Jesus doesn't shy away from the realities of our struggles, He acknowledges them and meets them head on. John portrays Jesus as a true realist who understands from the very beginning that there would be those constantly struggling to believe, there would be those who would not believe, and there would even be one among them who would betray Him, all of which is borne out as the gospel story unfolds.

Sharing in the daily life of the village, Mortenson realized how important a school would be, not only for the children, but for the region. A good education not only would help them improve their lives, but it would surely act to counter the religious extremists that were so prominent and pervasive around them. Mortenson knew what he had to do.

On leaving the village to return to the United States, Mortenson made the villagers a promise. It was the only way he could find to respond to their gifts of grace: shelter, sustenance, fellowship, and healing. He would return, and when he did he would build them a real school. Crazy you say. Impossible. What an incredible demand to put on himself. Returning to his nursing in the ER trauma unit in California, Mortenson began to realize just how hard the promise he made the villagers would be to keep.

He could have given up right then and there. Instead, he set about saving his money. He went about seeking financial support, and finally sold everything he possessed. The result of which was to give him the funds necessary to return to the village and buy the materials necessary to build the school.

Back at the village Mortenson discovered, much to his horror, that the villagers didn't want the school. First, they wanted a bridge to cross the raging river not far from the village, which separated it from everyone else. The bridge must come first, so as to improve access to the village. Mortenson might have quit, turned away, and given up the whole idea. But he was undeterred. He used all the funds he had brought with him, and set about, and built the bridge.

He returned to the States. He began raising funds a second time, until he was able to return to the village and build the school that he had promised. In the course of his work, Mortenson was kidnapped and threatened with death. He endured local rivalries, deep misunderstandings, jealousy, and corruption. But he believed passionately that balanced, non-extremist education for boys and girls alike, was so necessary and the most effective way to respond to the grace and love he had first received from them.

He also came to realize that building schools and educating the children of the area was a sure and effective way to combat the religious extremism and the violence and terrorism it breeds in the area. He didn't give up. He kept on laboring to keep his promise and he lived out his belief.

Just so beloved, we are invited to maintain and live out our belief, our hope, and our trust in Christ, despite His hard words and seemingly impossible demands. Much of what He says appears, at least on the surface, to be quite bizarre – eating flesh and drinking blood – ranking, perhaps, among the worst. The faithful Jews who heard this were shocked beyond belief. Such things were unthinkable and flew in the face of all their dietary laws. They were not to eat human flesh. They were not to consume the blood of any animal either, let alone the blood of human beings. It was absolutely repulsive to them, and for us as well, is it not?

Even when we explain Jesus' demand as verbal images meant to describe His presence in the bread and the wine, His words are still gross and hard to hear. And that's not all. Matthew, Mark, and Luke join in and invite us to "take up our cross" (the equivalent of us carrying an electric chair, to take up an instrument of execution) "and follow Him." And Paul exhorts us to proclaim Christ, "and Him crucified" in a nation where some churches no longer want to talk about Christ's suffering because it's so "icky." We are exhorted to love our enemies, to hate sin, and at the same time, love the sinners. It's next to impossible. Until we realize that we don't have to have it "all worked out." We are simply called to live out our discipleship, to work at it seriously, to give it our all, as best we can.

Just so, Mortenson kept at it until he fulfilled his promise to the villagers. Eventually the school was built, but not without many problems and twists and turns in the construction. However, Mortenson didn't stop there. He built another school. And another. And yet another. He went on to found the Central Asia Institute which has now constructed fifty-five schools in the surrounding area. And the work continues. And Al Qaeda and the terrorists are building madrases in competition. Just the same way as CVS and Rite Aid have to have their stores on the same corner. You can read the whole story in the book, "Three Cups of Tea."

And, the Twelve? Well, eleven of them stuck with Jesus despite His hard words and His seemingly impossible, incredible demands. But they didn't do it just by their own will power, they did it with the grace of God. That's where it's at, so to speak, isn't it?

We start where Mortenson began, the recipients of God unconditional love embraced, upheld, and enlivened by His grace. And we continue, not perhaps as we ought, but at least as we are able, to serve as channels of God's love and instruments of His grace, remembering that God reaches out to each and every one of us with love. He loves us, despite the things we don't love about ourselves. He loves us despite the things we think we've hidden from Him and others. He loves us despite the things we know about ourselves that would kill us if someone else were to know about it. He loves us just as we are. He gifts Himself to us in the form of Christ, who suffers and dies and pays the price that we might be raised from death and embraced by Him with the gift of eternal life. And then the question is 'how do we respond to that?'

Perhaps it is best summed up by a little girl's letter to Santa Claus. It was intercepted by a postal clerk in England, who was astonished when he read the letter, to discover it was from his own little daughter. The little girl told Santa that recently her little brother, Charlie, had died. She asked Santa if he would mind taking Charlie's presents up to heaven so that he would have something to play with. And then she told Santa of her parents' deep grief. She asked Santa to

bring something that would help her father stop crying so much. She wrote, "I heard him tell Mommy that only eternity could cure him. Santa, could you give Daddy some of that?"

We all need some of that, don't we? Some eternity. That's why today we have come to this service, and especially to this table, to eat and to drink, though the portions be tiny. It's a simple meal of bread and wine that is the body and blood of Christ. It's the grace given gift of the love of God, free and unconditional. Come beloved, take, eat and live.

Amen.