

“MORE THAN TEA AND COOKIES”

Genesis 18:1-15; Matthew 9:35 - 10:8

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I have recently been reading the book *Three Cups of Tea*. How many of you here are familiar with it? For those of you who haven't read it, *Three Cups of Tea* chronicles the transformation of one man, Greg Mortinson, from mountain climber and mountaineer to philanthropist. While attempting to climb nearby K2, the highest peak in Pakistan in the early 1990s, Mortinson suffered a series of misadventures that left him sick, weak, and injured. During his recovery, Mortinson was tended by the people of Corfe, a remote settlement of Baltistan, high in the mountains of northern Pakistan. In thanks for the hospitality and friendship offered to him by the Balti people, Mortinson resolved to build a school for the village children. This single commitment changed the course of Mortinson's life, eventually resulting in the establishment of the Central Asia Institute, an organization that has been responsible for the building of dozens of bridges, roads, water projects, vocational centers, but especially schools that serve the poorest of the poor in one of the most volatile corners of the earth.

The title of Mortinson's book comes from traditional Balti custom. When you enter a Balti home as an outsider, you are offered a first cup of tea as a stranger—because the Koran, like the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, commands kindness to strangers. At the second cup of tea, you become a guest, the beginnings of personal relationship. A third cup of tea offered makes you family, with both the privileges and responsibilities that entails.

I could not help but think of Mortinson's story as I read this morning's scripture from the Hebrew Bible. The people of Baltistan offered their hospitality to an injured and stranded climber, and out of that one hospitable action, an entire web of concrete aid, of relationship, and of hope has been spun, an alliance of respect and mutual endeavor previously unimaginable. Abraham and Sarah offered hospitality in the desert to three mysterious strangers, and out of that act came the birth of a son, a great nation, both a heritage and a personal joy that Abraham and Sarah were past the point of even dreaming about before.

I used to believe that hospitality was a fundamental spiritual discipline, like prayer or giving. But the more I read my Bible and study other faith traditions, the more I have become convinced that hospitality is more than a religious discipline: it is, in fact, the essential spiritual posture of faith. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism: all these in their sacred texts and in ancient practice enjoin believers to extend the deepest level of hospitality to those who are other: to the poor, to the stranger, to orphans and refugees. In all of these spiritual traditions, when we offer ourselves and our substance in this way, we are brought close to the presence of God. When we offer ourselves in this way, not only flowers but also dreams bloom in the deserts of high mountain valleys and bloom as well in the barren spaces of the human heart.

So what do we mean when we speak of hospitality in Christian terms? Originally, when I began writing this sermon, I had hoped that I could take the Balti tea-drinking progression—stranger, guest, family—and talk about a Christian theology of hospitality in terms of: how we respond to those outside of us—strangers; those who we welcome into the church—guests; and the hospitality

of our most intimate relationships—family. I was going to do all of this in one sermon! But today is Father’s Day, and the weather has turned nice, and upon reflection, I thought it might be considered inhospitable, despite our Puritan heritage, for me to offer you an hour long sermon this morning; so instead, I’m going to spread my remarks over three weeks. This morning, I’m only going to talk about hospitality in terms of our relationships with “strangers, outsiders,” those we perceive as “not us.”

The Bible speaks often and emphatically about the relationship between those who would consider themselves to be God’s people and the strangers in their midst. There’s this morning’s story of Abraham and Sarah, which I hope many of you already know is not a stand-alone story, but paired with the story that immediately follows it: the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Three strangers, whom we later find out are angels, approach the tents of Abraham and Sarah where the strangers are treated hospitably; they are offered food, a rest in the shade, and water for washing. Abraham and Sarah are rewarded for their kindness with the promise of Isaac. However, for the slow to learn, the story does not end here. The three men go on, this time to the city of Sodom. They are greeted warmly by Abraham’s kinsman Lot, but the rest of the townspeople threaten the strangers; they ask Lot to throw the men out in to the street so that the crowd may abuse them sexually, rape them. Lot refuses, defending the strangers at considerable risk to himself. Lot and his family are saved; sulfur and fire rain down from heaven on Sodom and Gomorrah. Lesson learned: The consequence of hospitality not extended is as devastating as the reward for welcome is great. And I know most of you already know this, but as an Open and Affirming church in the world in which we live, it can’t be said too often: the sin of Sodom is not homosexuality but inhospitable behavior to those perceived as strangers, those different from us.

It is not only for our friends in the GLBT community that these hospitality stories are important. More and more, our communities, our country, our world are becoming polarized, divided into two groups: us and not us—“not us” being any who are perceived as other, ominously or scandalously different from us. Us and not us: Korean-American vs. African-American gangs in Seattle, native-born British workers vs Eastern European immigrants, the Sudanese military vs. the Sudan Liberation Movement, gays and lesbians vs. evangelical Christians, Americans and the Islamic world. And the question that this puts before the community of the church is, “Where are we, what is our responsibility, when the strangers of our world are treated not just inhospitably but often despicably?” Abraham’s kinsman Lot risked his life, even offered up his family to the mob, as an act of holy hospitality to strangers under his roof. What are we willing to do to be hospitable to the strangers of our day?

What are we willing to do, for example, in a world where the use of torture is more and more seen as a necessary evil, part of the new rules of engagement required by international Islamic terrorism? This past week, our church as well as several others in town, raised a banner facing the street proclaiming “Honor God. Stop Torture,” as part of the “torture is a moral issue campaign.” At first, I was a little embarrassed by the banner. How can you disagree that torture is a moral issue? So I went online, and found myself reading one article after another justifying torture of suspected—not even known, but suspected—Muslim terrorists. No other threatening groups, just Muslims. But the most chilling thing I read was a 2006 study conducted by the Pew Research group, reported in the *National Catholic Reporter*. White American Christians, whether

they identified themselves as Protestants, Evangelicals or Catholics, all those groups were more willing than the population as a whole to support the use of torture.

The torture statistics made me so uncomfortable that I went looking for data specifically about Americans and their perception of the Muslim world. So here are some: a 2004 study done by Cornell University found that 44% of Americans support modifying the civil liberties of all Muslim Americans, including such actions as mandatory registration, covert surveillance of mosques, and government infiltration of Muslim social organizations. In this Cornell study again, religious Americans held significantly more negative views of Islam than the secular public, considering Islam more violent than other religions, and Muslim countries—no distinguishing among different Muslim countries—all Muslim countries to be violent, fanatical, and dangerous. One more poll and then I'll stop. A Harris poll taken about three years ago describes less than 2% of Americans considering themselves as “well-educated” about Islam, 67% saying they know only a little, 13% saying they know nothing at all, and 43% uninterested in learning anything more.

There are many groups of “strangers” in our world. I chose to focus on Muslims today, both because of the banner we've been flying outside the church, and because alongside the statistics I've been looking at, I keep holding up in front of me the images from this book, *Three Cups of Tea*, of one man, drinking endless cups of tea with village elders, reading everything he could get his hands on about the history and culture of Pakistan's people, getting to know these people as an interested friend, choosing not fear or guns, but hospitality, friendship, and education as his weapons in his own personal war on terrorism.

I do not hold up Mortinson as a perfect man or one with “the” answers to the challenges that plague us in the world of “us vs. not us.” But I do see him as a man who understands for himself God's call to practice hospitality in ways wide and deep. His ability to listen, his respect for and enjoyment of the people with whom he has bound his life's fortunes, his continued and concrete advocacy and care for the remote peoples of far northern and western Pakistan and Afghanistan, all of these things have accomplished the goals we should set for ourselves as the hospitable people of God: the poor are cared for, the refugees not forgotten, and the ones who were once called “stranger” are now called “friend.” Thanks be to God. Amen.