

## A Reading from the Gospel According to Matthew

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.

This week is National Hunger and Homelessness Awareness week and I could stand up here and talk all about hunger and homelessness in Boston or in the United States, but many of you hear about that every day in the news. Instead, I decided to speak about how our penny drive relates to this national week.

Five months ago I was sitting in a coffee shop in downtown Boston waiting to meet up with a friend, when a complete stranger walked up to me and asked what I was reading. I gave him a brief overview of the book I was reading at the time, and he responded to me by simply telling me that I had to read the book Three Cups of Tea by Greg Mortenson. I filed the name away in my memory, and weeks later I bought the book. Three Cups of Tea has since changed my outlook on many things.

Last Thursday night I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Greg Mortenson. Greg wrote the book Three Cups of Tea, which is the book that inspired and began the Pennies for Peace campaigns around the country. There are people in your life whom you meet and you know that you are in the presence of sincerity and greatness. That is Greg for me. I was fortunate to arrange meeting Greg before he gave a lecture at Harvard. Despite me being a short person, Greg is very tall. He's a towering 6'3" and imposing in stature, but in stature only. When you meet him, he has a calming, sincere presence. This imposing man, with shaggy hair, a black fleece on, and no shoes, spoke to me, the short, 5'0" stranger, as if I was the only person who existed at that moment. He looked me square in the eyes and ignored the flurry around him as his "crew" was preparing for his lecture.

"As-salaam alaaikum" is how he greeted me. From the Balti, that translates to "Welcome and peace be with you." Our encounter was brief, no more than five minutes, however, I was as inspired by meeting him as I was by reading his book.

But now you are all probably wondering why I am bothering telling you about my meeting Greg Mortenson. For just over a month now, as a school we have been raising pennies. I figured that it's about time that you know where those pennies are going to.

In 1993 Greg Mortenson, an avid mountain climber, decided to climb K2, the second tallest mountain in the world, in memory of his sister, Christa. Greg made it 600 feet from the summit, when one of his fellow climbers needed rescuing. During Greg's 2-week descent from the top of K2, he began to get altitude sickness and stumbled into the small village of Korphe in the Baltoro mountain valley of Pakistan. Greg comically recounts how he barely spoke the Balti language and had not showered in over three months, but these people, whom had never seen a white person before in their lives, took him in and nursed him back to health over the course of 6 weeks. During his time there, he learned about the Tibetan Muslim culture and the villagers, but he also realized that the children were always around, and questioned to himself why they were not in school. Just before leaving Korphe, Greg asked Haji Ali, the village chief, where the school was for the children. He recounts the conversation as this:

“And it was obvious that most of the money that reached this altitude was earmarked for the army, to finance its costly standoff with Indian forces along the Siachen Glacier. But a dollar a day for a teacher, Mortenson fumed, how could a government, even one as impoverished as Pakistan's, not provide that? Why couldn't that flag of crescent and star lead these children such a small distance toward 'progress and perfection?'

“After the last note of the anthem had faded, the children sat in a neat circle and began copying their multiplication tables. Most scratched in the dirt with sticks they'd brought for that purpose. The more fortunate, like Jahna, had slate boards they wrote on with sticks dipped in a mixture of mud and water. 'can you imagine a fourth-grade class in America, alone, without a teacher, sitting there quietly and working on their lessons?' Mortenson asks. 'I felt like my heart was being torn out. There was a fierceness in their desire to learn, despite how mightily everything was stacked against them, that reminded me of [my sister]. I knew I had to do something.'

“But what? He had just enough money, if he ate simply and stayed in the cheapest guest houses, to travel by jeep and bus back to Islamabad and catch his flight home.

“In California he could look forward to only sporadic nursing work, and most of his possessions fit in the trunk of [his car] he [called home]. Still, there had to be something.

“Standing next to Haji Ali, on the ledge overlooking the valley, with such a crystalline view of the mountains he'd come halfway around the world to measure himself against, climbing K2 to place a necklace on its summit suddenly felt beside the point. There was a much more meaningful gesture he could make in honor of his sister's memory. He put his hands on Haji Ali's shoulders, as the old man had

done to him dozens of times since they'd shared their first cup of tea. 'I'm going to build you a school,' he said, not yet realizing that with those words, the path of his life had just detoured down another trail, a route far more serpentine and arduous than the wrong turns he'd taken since retreating from K2. 'I *will* build a school,' Mortenson said. 'I promise.'" (pgs 32-33).

Greg then returned to the United States and it took him 4 years to build his first school, which took \$12,000 per school.

Greg's dedication to the people of Pakistan, and now Afghanistan, goes beyond simply wanting to build the children schools. Greg's dedication is to educate both the children and the parents. In service learning classes in college, professors would often tell my classes that in order to help solve poverty, you need to go to feel it, touch it, see it, and smell it. You cannot help poverty if you never experience it in some way. This is why Trinity has trips like the Camden service immersion trip, and the DR service learning trip. Those experiences allow you, the students and faculty, to feel, touch, see, and smell poverty. For 6 weeks, Greg did just that, and ultimately concluded that education is hope. This is something that I am sure many of you can identify with. A high school degree, and a college degree are powerful tools in the United States. Simply having those 2 pieces of paper opens up more doors to you than not having them. This is true in most countries of the world.

In the age of terrorism and fears of nuclear weapons in Pakistan and Afghanistan, Greg believes that the only way a society will change is through education. And more specifically, educating the young girls. Like in the inner cities of the United States, if the girls and mothers are educated, they are less likely to allow their sons to join gangs and terrorist organizations. By educating the communities in rural Pakistan and Afghanistan, Greg is hoping to fight terrorism through peace. He believes, and inspired me to my own re-commitment to my beliefs, that we can change the world through educating our young people.

Now to all of those pennies that we have been raising. During the first 4 years of Greg raising money and building the first school, he struggled with getting donations. His own mother was a teacher in Wisconsin. She invited her son to come and speak to her students about geography and the K2 mountain area. After he spoke about the villagers and trying to build a school, the students, elementary school students, raised \$632.45 in just pennies in one month. That's 63,245 pennies in 4 weeks. We are trying for 150,000 pennies in three months.

Why am I telling you about one American man, who has decided to go against conventional thought and help out poor children in a land of terrorism? Because it more than just about building schools in some of the most remote places on earth. As Greg stated and reiterated on Thursday night, it's about giving hope to *everyone*. It's about realizing the inherent potential of all people to be good and to

work towards good in the world. And I truly believe that if you ask any of your teachers, and anyone you know who has gotten into education, somewhere in them, whether they realize it or not, they got into education to give hope to someone that they, too, can make a difference in the world.

Everyday teachers around the world travel distances great and small to educate the students and give them a sense of hope. It is our job to help you believe in yourself, to instill hope in each of you that you will succeed in the world. As a Catholic school, Trinity also tries to teach you to give back, in big and small ways. What better way can you return the power of education than to give another student of the world the chance to learn and provide a better life for himself or herself and the village?

I apologize if this talk sounds scattered and disjointed. I have sat for 4 days trying to find the words that I wanted to relay to you. I have been immensely inspired by the stories of Greg Mortenson and his work in Pakistan, and Afghanistan and somehow wanted to convey that inspiration to you. When I met Greg, he signed my copy of Three Cups of Tea. His inscription reads “Jessica, when your heart speaks, take good notes.” My challenge for you this week is to listen to your heart. Listen to what inspires you, to what gives you hope, to what gives you energy, and then... take good notes. Let that inspiration, that hope, move you, too, into action.