

Overcoming Barriers Pentecost 23 – 31st October 2010

Readings:

Luke 19: 1-10

O God, you surprise us with love that seeks and embraces. Your graceful welcome is so affirming that it is life changing. Help us to embrace your welcoming Spirit with gratitude and joy, so that we too may live with such love. AMEN.

Through the week I had a delightful conversation with a young Sudanese woman who was being introduced to the mysteries of the computer by Teresa our office assistant, who runs a “computers for refugees” course. She had come to Australia after spending 7 years in a refugee camp in Zimbabwe of all places. I commented that it must have been like going from the fry pan into the fire. Once I clarified the metaphor, she was able to tell me that it is very hard for Australians to understand just how difficult her road has been.

I’ve spent some time since that conversation thinking about what she said and musing upon the great number of barriers she, and most refugees, have to overcome just to start life over again. First she had to overcome the barrier of Sudanese militia hell bent on killing herself and her family. Then she had to get over the three borders to get to the refugee camp in Zimbabwe, three more barriers, and then another 7 year wait in fairly squalid conditions as she waited to be accepted into Australia. She told me she had been in Australia for two years, had another two years before she would be eligible to become an Australian citizen - the final barrier in a long trek.

And I took this thought of barriers into my sermon today as I thought of Zacchaeus, another person who had barriers to overcome.

Our Gospel reading is set in Jericho. Now, concept of place has a great meaning in the Gospel of Luke. Luke especially sets his stories of Jesus in very specific places. Often it is in the badlands, outside Israel, on the edge of respectable society. Here he places Jesus passing through Jericho. And what is it that we know about Jericho?

That’s right Jericho’s wall - a last barrier that is overcome as the Israelites enter their promised land. God acts and the walls come tumbling down.

Well here’s Jesus on his way to Jerusalem where cosmic barrier crossing will occur with his crucifixion and resurrection. But first a more intimate breaking down of barriers with a little man called Zacchaeus. More than most, Zacchaeus knew about barriers. His profession, tax collector for the dreaded Romans, had excluded him from polite Jewish society. Who knows, it may have cost him some family relationships - at any rate here was a man ready for new life. He’d heard about Jesus and perhaps saw a chance to start over again. He’s faced with the barrier of a crowd who knew who he was and were not willing to give him a break. As he jumped and craned to get a view - “Too bad little man! We’re not letting you in!”. A familiar cry. So he climbs a tree! Risky business for someone of his size and reputation. And then comes Jesus’ self invitation - “I’m coming to your place for tea.” Both

Jesus and Zacchaeus breach the barrier of convention - a rabbi and a tax-collector. What a scandal.

Zacchaeus put away his pride and dares a relationship with Jesus. I smile, because I'm not sure who is offering hospitality here, Zacchaeus who provides the meal or Jesus who provides opportunity for new life. At any rate barriers have been broken and walls have come a-tumbling down! Zacchaeus promises to turn his back on corruption and Jesus promises salvation.

And it all starts with a meal, a willingness to sit down together without the barriers. And I wonder about the barriers in our lives. Barriers that seek to put us in our place, where others who know nothing about us have already made decisions about who and what we are. And sadly we go along with the definitions of others and forget the only definition of all of us - that we are loved children of God. And then there are the barriers we erect ourselves from fear of being hurt. No one's getting near me, and we can live a life cut off from those who want to care. Barriers are never good for the soul. And Jesus' offering to the world is the final pulling down of barriers. That's the sense of Jesus reaching out to all the unlovely ones. That's the sense of the temple being rent in two at Jesus' crucifixion. That's the sense of Jesus' interaction with Zacchaeus. Jesus is always on about new life.

And often new life starts with hospitality. Let me tell you the story of a man who is offered radical hospitality and his life and the lives of so many others have been irrevocably changed. To my mind this a Christ story from the book **"Three Cups of Tea"**:

According to custom in Afghanistan and Pakistan, it takes three cups of tea in order to do business. Over the first cup of tea you are a stranger. During the second tea gathering you become a friend. With the third cup of tea you become family - then you are ready to do business. The entire process takes several years but, once the relationship is forged, family members will protect you with their lives.

This three-cup tradition led to the title of a best-selling book, "Three Cups of Tea," about the life of mountain-climber turned activist, Greg Mortenson. Mortenson became familiar with Pakistan custom after being rescued by a villager when he failed to reach the peak of K2. A guide, Mouzefar, stumbled upon Mortenson who was in a weakened state and would have died had Mouzefar not found him when he did. Mouzefar led Mortenson down the mountain and left him in the care of a small Pakistani village, Korphe, that nursed Mortenson back to health.

While in the village of Korphe, Mortenson became the guest not only of tea gatherings but of several gracious meals that included the entire community. Mortenson was overwhelmed by the hospitality he received and he recalled how the villagers sweetened his tea with their last spoons of sugar and slaughtered one of the few village goats in order to feed him meat.

For several months, Mortenson was the recipient of the generous hospitality of Korphe. Regardless of the meal's bounty - or lack thereof - or the number of guests, stories were told, wisdom passed, and relationships bonded over shared bread.

This bread breaking was truly transformative for Mortenson, who found himself not only growing in physical strength but fed in deeply spiritual ways around the tables of his gracious hosts.

In recalling this life-changing experience, David Relin in the book "Three Cups of Tea" writes: ***"Greg Mortenson knew he owed the people of Korphe more than he could repay. But he was determined to try. He began giving away the things he had brought with him. Small, useful items like Nalgene water bottles or flashlights were precious to the Balti. He gave Sakina, Haji Ali's wife, his camping stove. He handed Twaha, the chief's son, his fleece jacket, even though it was several sizes too big. To Haji Ali he gave the parka that had kept him warm on K2."***

But the transformation within Mortenson called him beyond giving away material possessions or offering free medical advice (Mortenson is a registered nurse). He wanted to do more. One day Mortenson travelled with the village chief, Haji Ali, to a nearby school. The school was located on an open piece of land at the end of a steep path some distance away from Korphe. When Mortenson arrived, he found seventy-eight boys and four girls kneeling on the frosty ground studying. Haji Ali explained that Korphe had no school building and that a teacher would cost one dollar a day - more than the village could afford. Therefore they shared a teacher with a nearby village. The teacher came to Korphe three days a week and the rest of the time the children were left to practice the lessons he left behind for them. Mortenson was moved by the scene and said about the experience, "I felt like my heart was being torn out... I knew I had to do something."

When Mortenson left Pakistan some weeks later, he returned home and began an organization to build schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Ten years after leaving Pakistan, Mortenson has seen the completion of more than 78 schools. By replacing guns with pencils, rhetoric with reading, Mortenson promotes peace with books, not bombs, and is successfully bringing hope to remote communities in central Asia.

It is not easy for Mortenson. He has often met with many obstacles and failure from the outside including being kidnapped for eight days. Moreover, as the book *Three Cups of Tea* reveals, Mortenson is not perfect or heroic as he struggles to balance his passion for building schools with maintaining a healthy life physically and emotionally. But the prevailing message Mortenson hopes all people will take from his life is that each of us has the power to change the world, one cup of tea at a time.

And that's how Christ's offer of hospitality works! He came, he lived among us, received hospitality and changes the lives of so many - only Christ's cup of tea was bread and wine!

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