

## COURAGE, PERSISTENCE, AND GENEROSITY

### Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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November 21, 2010

This morning I want to talk with you about **heroism**. Ever since the attacks on September 11, 2001, the word “hero” has been used so often that it has lost much of its meaning. The other day I saw an ad on TV that a mom could be a “hero” simply by serving a certain food product to her family. But there are **real** heroes in the world, and Thanksgiving week is a good time to recognize them and express our gratitude to them. I encourage you and your family to watch CNN this Thursday at 8:00 p.m., when they will honor ten Americans from very different backgrounds who have earned the right to be called heroes.

This past week, President Obama presented the Medal of Honor, our nation's highest award for military service, to Sgt. Salvatore Giunta for his bravery while serving in Afghanistan in 2007. For over a year he was assigned to a remote valley near the Pakistan border, which was nicknamed “Death Valley” because of the high rate of casualties suffered by American soldiers. When his squad was ambushed by Taliban insurgents, Sgt. Giunta charged forward under heavy fire to rescue two of his wounded comrades before they could be killed or captured by enemy fighters, giving first aid until they could be airlifted for medical treatment.

When I watched an interview with Sgt. Giunta and his fellow soldiers on “60 Minutes,” my eyes filled with tears: above all, in admiration for his unselfishness about his actions, but also because of the tragic footnotes to his heroic story. The soldier he rescued from being captured by the Taliban fighters died from his injuries a few hours later. A few months later, military planners decided to abandon this valley, where a total of 42 American soldiers lost their lives, and because the local residents were deeply resentful of having foreign soldiers there. And so, as with so many wars and so many acts of incredible battlefield bravery, we are left with these questions: Was it worth all the sacrifice of human life on both sides of the conflict? And, is there some other way to settle our differences?

That leads me to the story of another type of hero, whose actions extend over several years rather than several minutes. His name is Greg Mortenson, and not coincidentally his heroic acts took place in the very same part of the world as Sgt. Giunta's. When Greg Mortenson stumbled into a tiny mountain village in northern Pakistan, he was a completely broken man. A week earlier, his dream of reaching the summit of K2, the world's second highest mountain, had to be abandoned when he helped rescue a fellow climber who had ascended too fast. During the dangerous trek back down the mountain, Mortenson was traveling separately from his local guide when he became disoriented and lost his way. Now here he was, exhausted and marooned in an unknown village of simple stone huts perched high above a thundering river that gushed forth from the mountains. As he entered the village trailed by fifty curious children, he was met by the village elder, Haji Ali, who offered the traditional Muslim greeting: “*As-salaam Alaikum* (may peace be with you),” and ushered him into one of the stone huts.

Even though he was the first foreigner ever to visit the village of Korphe, he was overwhelmed by their hospitality during the period of recovery from his ordeal. One of their rituals of hospitality was the sharing of tea. Haji Ali told him, “The first cup of tea you share with us, you are a stranger. The second cup, you are a friend. But with the third cup, you become family—and for our families we are willing to do anything, even die.” [Greg Mortenson, *Stones into Schools*, p. 17] For his part, Mortenson used his training as a nurse and supplies from his emergency medical kit to treat the injuries and infections of the villagers. He also learned that there was no school in Korphe. The children shared a teacher from a neighboring village, and scratched their lessons with sticks in the bare ground. As he was leaving, Mortenson promised that he would return someday and help them build a school.

Keeping that promise turned out to be an enormous challenge. After returning to the United States, he worked the night shift in an emergency room and slept in the back seat of a gas-guzzling Buick he nicknamed La Bamba that he had inherited from his family. And he wrote more than 500 letters to celebrities, politicians, and philanthropic organizations, seeking their support for the school-building project he had promised. All he needed was \$12,000. No one responded until an eccentric millionaire who was also a mountain climber offered his support. Mortenson sold La Bamba for \$500 to pay his travel expenses back to Pakistan. He purchased the building materials in the city nearest Korphe and transported them up the perilous mountain roads. When he finally reached his destination, the village leaders told him that, in order for the materials for the school to be delivered, a bridge must be built across the yawning chasm high above the river. Crestfallen, Mortenson returned to San Francisco, where his girlfriend told him that during his absence, she had fallen in love with another man, and his supervisor at the ER told him he was fired.

In spite of all these setbacks, Mortenson doggedly pursued his dream. With an additional donation of \$10,000 from his only financial supporter, he returned to Pakistan once again, and with the help of the Korphe villagers, they built the bridge and a year later the school, with Mortenson being given the honor of driving the final nail in the roof. From that humble beginning, Greg Mortenson founded an international organization (the Central Asia Institute) which since then has been responsible for building nearly 150 schools in remote areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. These schools are built with the cooperation of local community and Muslim religious leaders, and they are staffed by teachers from the local area. In spite of the violence that permeates this part of the world, only one of these schools has been attacked by the Taliban. Apparently, the commitment of these village leaders to the education of their children overrides their deep-seated mistrust of modern civilization.

Perhaps most importantly, most of the students in these schools are **girls**. “Simply put,” says Mortenson, “young women are the single biggest potential agents of change in the developing world—a phenomenon that is sometimes referred to as the Girl Effect and that echoes an African proverb I often heard during my childhood years in Tanzania [where his parents were teachers sponsored by a Lutheran missionary group]: ‘If you teach a boy, you educate an individual; but if you teach a girl, you educate a community.’ No other factor even comes close to matching the cascade of positive changes triggered by teaching a single girl how to read and write.” [*Stones into Schools*, p. 13]

Some of the most profound experiences of heroism occur when people are willing to cross seemingly insurmountable boundaries of separation. This is why the experiences of Greg

Mortenson are so inspiring. He suddenly found himself dangling by a thread in a language and culture that was totally foreign to him. Nevertheless, he and the Korphe villagers discovered a common commitment that transcended their obvious differences: their shared faith in the power of learning. One night, sitting before a smoldering fire in his stone hut, the village elder Haji Ali confessed to Mortenson that he could not read the Koran. “I can’t read anything. This is the greatest sadness in my life. I’ll do anything so the children of my village never have to know this feeling. I’ll pay any price so they have the education they deserve.” [Greg Mortenson & David Oliver Relin, *Three Cups of Tea*, p. 153]

One day Haji Ali proved that he really meant this in a dramatic confrontation with the local warlord, who demanded that in return for his agreement not to interfere with the building of the school, he must be compensated with twelve of the village’s prize rams. “You have to understand, in these villages, a ram is like a firstborn child, prize cow, and family pet all rolled into one. The most sacred duty of each family’s oldest boy was to care for their rams, and they were devastated. . . . It was one of the most humbling things I’ve ever seen,” says Mortenson. “Haji Ali had just handed over half the wealth of the village to that crook, but he was smiling like he’d just won the lottery. . . . ‘Don’t be sad,’ he told the shattered crowd [after he had led them to the nearly completed school building]. ‘Long after all those rams are dead and eaten, this school will still stand. . . . Now our children have education forever. . . .’” “Sitting there beside him,” Mortenson says, “I realized that everything, all the difficulties I’d gone through, from the time I’d promised to build the school, through the long struggle to complete it, was nothing compared to the sacrifices he was prepared to make for his people. Here was this illiterate man, who’d hardly ever left his little village . . . . Yet he was the wisest man I’ve ever met.” [*Three Cups of Tea*, pp. 152-53] In a single dramatic decision, Haji Ali had translated his faith in education into hope for the future of his people. He too is a hero.

Most of us do not have the opportunity or the instinctive courage to act heroically like the people I have described today. But we do have the opportunity to support their efforts to make the world better for future generations. In a few minutes we will take a special collection to support the ongoing efforts of Greg Mortenson’s organization to provide education and **hope** to young people—especially young women—in the rural villages of Afghanistan and Pakistan. In recognition for his efforts on behalf of building bridges of peace and education, Greg Mortenson has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. It’s hard to image a more deserving recipient.

We Americans are not known for our patience. We expect simple and immediate solutions to complex and long-term problems. Our patience **and** our willingness to endure discomfort and sacrifice will be tested many times during the next several years. **Hopefully**, the individual heroism of a Sgt. Giunta will be complemented by the heroic efforts of hundreds and even thousands of heroes like Greg Mortenson. Perhaps one of the young people in this room will commit themselves to his goal of pursuing increased understanding among people of differing faiths and cultures. Is there a dream of reconciliation that beckons to you as powerfully as it did to Greg Mortenson? I hope you will pursue it as persistently as he has. In the meantime, let us give thanks and give generously to support the work of those brave heroes who are showing us the way.

**SPECIAL COLLECTION FOR PENNIES FOR PEACE****A THANKSGIVING BLESSING**

As we are gathered here together, let us join together in giving thanks . . .

For all of the brave men and women who have sacrificed their lives on behalf of our nation's commitment to freedom and justice.

For the unsung heroes who devote their lives every day to the possibility of a brighter future for all of our brothers and sisters around the world who are struggling to overcome the challenges they face.

For the abundance that is ours to share.

For the love and support of our families and friends.

May we seek new ways to share our abundance with those who are less fortunate.

May we seek new ways to connect with those who are different from us.

May we seek to bring wholeness into our lives and the lives of everyone we encounter.

May the wholeness we seek come over time to a world that is deeply divided and fragmented.

This is our prayer. Let this be as well our commitment. So may it be. Amen.