

John 12:1-8

Godly play

Delivered March 21, 2010

In 2009 Greg Mortesen published a sequel to his #1 New York Times bestselling book, **Three cups of Tea**. The new one is entitled **Stones into Schools**. Most of this new book deals with Greg's continued efforts to build schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which have become even more challenging not just because of political events in those countries, but also because of an horrific earthquake that hit remote parts of Afghanistan in 2005.

That earthquake registered 7.6 on the Richter scale—and just to put some kind of perspective to that—the Haitian earthquake measured 7.0 on the Richter scale. Afghanistan 7.6, Haiti, 7.0. The quake in Afghanistan triggered 2,252 landslides. After the quake, in and around the town of Patika, the quake's epicenter, there wasn't a single hospital bed, working telephone, or drop of municipal drinking water. The death toll from the quake exceeded **86 thousand** people. Afghans still refer to the quake as "the Apocalypse."

Now, maybe like me, when I first learned of this earthquake, you are thinking to yourself, "I don't remember any earthquake in Afghanistan." The reason you may not remember it is because it wasn't heavily publicized, and the reason it wasn't heavily publicized is because in 2005 the world was suffering from what is called "compassion fatigue." Remember, 2005 was also the year of the Katrina Hurricane and the Asian Tsunami. With these other catastrophes already rocking our world, we just couldn't absorb and the media didn't have air time, newspaper space or manpower to report any more disaster information.

However, the earthquake and its devastation were of deep concern for American citizen, Greg Mortesen. Eighteen thousand Afghani children died in that quake. Only one of his own schools was destroyed, still he knew many, many people impacted by that quake and he would meet many more after the tragedy. With no government infrastructure to speak of, The Afghani people came knocking at Greg Mortesen's door asking for help.

In his book, **Stones into Schools**, Greg Mortesen tells how his growing operation, the Central Asian Institute, responded to the quake by rebuilding schools at a furious pace. However, it was only by listening to his daughter that Greg Mortesen came to realize that hurting Afghani children needed more than school buildings, classroom space and even teachers if they were ever going to heal from their emotional wounds.

One day several months into the rebuilding campaign his daughter asked him, "Hey Dad, what kinds of games do the children in your ....schools play?" Greg shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know."

His daughter responded, "You should get those kids some jump ropes." And then she added, "Dad you don't have any playgrounds at your schools, do you? You really need to put them in. All children need to play, especially ones that are suffering and hurting like the kids in Afghanistan."

Those sounded like good ideas to him. Greg's daughter called Gold's gym, which agreed to make a donation. Greg Mortesen subsequently sent 2000 jump ropes to Afghani schools. That was the beginning of CAI's play program. Since 2006, the CAI has incorporated playgrounds into most of the new schools and it has retrofitted existing schools with swings and slides. Greg Mortesen says, "The play and exercise [has] brought joy and delight to the children, and their enthusiasm [has] spread like wildfire... to depressed communities."

One more story concerning play.

Several weeks ago I attended a workshop sponsored by Hospice. Our excellent speaker, Lutheran pastor, Dr. Ken Doka, has written many books and articles on Death and Dying. He shared with us one of his experiences as a chaplain working in a children's oncology ward. A young teen in his care was suffering from leukemia. The prognosis was bleak. The patient was smart enough to pick up on non-verbal cues, so his family had finally told him, "You are probably going to die." One very early morning—around 2 a.m. Dr. Doka got a call from the oncology ward. This teen wanted to talk with him. The chaplain dressed and made a very early morning visit to the hospital. The young man was calm, not teary or angry—just curious. He wanted to know about death—what it was like, where he would go. And the teen wanted to know about things he would never have a chance to experience. He wanted to know what it was like to kiss a woman, for example. The chaplain opened his soul to this young man. It was a sad, but poignant conversation.

Later that day, as Dr. Doka made his rounds, he thought of so much else he wanted to tell the young man, so that evening he visited again. This time, though, the teen wasn't interested in talking about death at all. He wanted to talk about his interest in law. "When I finish high school, I want to go to college and then law school so I can be an attorney." The chaplain was taken aback. Was this teen delusional? There were two ways the chaplain could go. He could pull the teen back to reality—"Son, you won't be finishing high school," or he could go along with the fantasy. "Ok, what kind of law do you want to practice?" The compassionate Dr. Doka chose the latter. Thinking about this incident later, the chaplain realized—that young man just couldn't live with reality 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. He needed a fantasy. He needed to play.

Along the same lines, a clergy person told me this week that he visited a woman in hospice. He entered her sick room, asked how she was doing. She said, "Well, I'm in denial right now. And that's exactly where I want to be, so don't ruin it for me."

In our scripture passage for today, we tend to side with Mary against the evil Judas. But really, you have to admit Mary's actions are odd, to the point of being scandalous. She is wiping Jesus' feet with her hair—Jesus-- a man to whom she is not even related. AND she anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfume, which costs 300

denari. One denari equals one full day's wage—so three hundred denari equals three hundred days' wages—or almost a year's full wage for a day laborer. That's a lot to spend on someone you're not even related to. Not only are her actions scandalous, though, they are also wasteful. What would one year's wages buy? Food for a whole lot of people for one thing. Or, if only Mary and the rest had been thinking, maybe they could have sold the nard and used the proceeds to buy off some of Jesus' political and religious detractors. Some people speculate that Mary was symbolically preparing Jesus for his burial. Others say that again, symbolically, she was anointing Jesus as king in God's kingdom. There are merits to both these interpretations.

But it is also true that Mary is at play. Just like homeless Afghani children jumping rope on the playground, just like the dying boy who dreams of being an attorney. Mary has had enough of reality. She's not delusional, although she may be in denial—for the span of one evening. Her play offers an interlude from the cacophony of hostility and demands that is becoming more and more front and center in Jesus' world, and as Jesus' friend, her world, too. You might say it's her way of self caring and self healing. She invites Jesus to join her in her play—which he does, hungrily, greedily even. How else do you explain, “You will always have the poor with you?”

This play is also a form of worship. Here we are in Lent—Forty days of penitence, almsgiving, self denial and introspection, so says my religious dictionary. This is the period of time in the church calendar when we fix our minds on Jesus' great sacrifice. However, you can't be penitent and you can't engage in self-denial and introspection ALL the time. So our church calendar composers decided that the forty days of Lent would not include Sundays. Sundays are our “little Easters”—times to refrain from Lenten practices and our focus on death, and instead, focus on resurrection. In Sunday worship during Lent, as on Sundays during the rest of the church year, we are reminded of God's extravagance even in the midst of scarcity—Our senses are awake to God's creation—not the scent of nard, maybe but the tastes of communion, the sounds of our singing. Our souls take delight in that which we find here, we turn our burdens over to God, and we are healed.

Episcopal priest and religious writer Frederick Buechner says that in leading a service one Sunday, when it came time for pastoral prayers instead of saying “Let us pray,” he said, “Let us play.” Reflecting on that mistake later he says that perhaps he had it right after all.

The bottom line is that God does not intend for us to be over- burdened. That is what we take from our passage for today. It is God's intention for us to take time to play. Let us continue then, to find all joy and healing in our worship and let us pray for a time, when the Kingdom is come in all its fullness, when our Sunday worship spills over into the rest of the week and when **every** day is a little Easter. Let all the people say, Amen