

...BRIDGES...

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Every morning for two weeks in January 2003, I was privileged to provide the director of the Prague Philharmonia with practice speaking English, as he prepared to attend an international conference in France. As we discussed a variety of topics, which ranged from practical vocabulary to world events to Czech politics, I felt as if I had been given a gift. But, I knew that this truly was the case when Dr. Smid used his command of English to reveal something of what it means to cherish human beings from other cultures and different traditions as the gifts from God that they surely are.

A smile played in his eyes as Dr. Smid told me of traveling with the Philharmonia in Japan. One morning after leaving the hotel, he went into a nearby pastry shop to purchase two small cakes for the day's journey. He thought that there would be ample time to make his purchase while his companions were getting settled into the bus. However, he realized that this was not going to be the case when he saw the shopkeeper giving painstaking attention to every fold of the paper and every curl of the ribbon as she slowly wrapped the cakes. Seeing that the bus was ready to depart, Dr. Smid was restless – until he became aware of the artistry that was unfolding in front of him. As he relaxed, he began to be grateful for the traditions of hospitality and excellence that came to a climax when the shopkeeper placed her creation in his hand with a gentle smile.... “As I walked to the bus, I carried my little package as if it was a beautiful gift,” he declared.

Dr. Smid concluded his remembrances without further comment, but I have carried his reflections further in my mind as the months have passed and our world has become ever more fragmented. The conclusions that I have reached are far too simple to address the rampant conflicts and growing “dis-ease” that is the order of this time. However, it seems to me that human beings throughout the world might do well to cherish the traditions that people who are somehow “different” from them have to offer. It has been my experience that no matter how different their inclinations and traditions may appear to be, most of the people we meet come before us bearing gifts. However, we human beings are sometimes so focused on what we understand and what we have to offer that we do not even realize that a gift has been prepared for us.

It was similar centuries ago when a carpenter – who appeared to be nothing more than a common man – came among people who were longing for a powerful king to set them free and establish peace. That man called the people to embark on a way characterized by service, compassion, and humility, and, in the end, few people were able to recognize and receive the gift of life that he had come to offer. Few people imagined that this ‘suffering servant’ could be their true liberation and deepest peace. The world was not able to treasure the gift that had been prepared for it.

It has often been thus in our very human world, which has remained driven by fear and fascinated with power. Yet, I dare to believe that our true liberation and deepest peace will arrive without fanfare or force. Thus, we may do well to be expectant and vigilant when people who appear to be different in inclination and tradition come before us bearing gifts. As we recognize these people to be the gifts from God that they surely are, perhaps acts of humble hospitality will help foster the ways of peace that are so urgently needed by our world and in our lives. May you recognize and welcome the gifts of love that have been prepared for you, as other human beings offer themselves to you and as Christ's call to the ‘heartlands’ of compassion and service invites you to enter into a new way of being and doing.

[written by Joyce Michael, a mission co-worker serving with the PC(USA) in the Czech Republic]