

"A PENNY FOR YOUR FAITH"
Mark 12:38-44
November 11, 2018
York Center Church of the Brethren
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

Gregory Boyle spends his days with gang members in Los Angeles. He is a Jesuit priest and the founder and executive director of Homeboy Industries. In 1986 he became the pastor of the Delores Mission Church, the poorest parish in the Los Angeles archdiocese. The church sat between two large public housing projects. When he began his work as pastor the area had eight active gangs. It was infamous for having the highest concentration of gang activity in Los Angeles. Over time he helped his congregation offer alternatives and opportunities to gang members and their families.

In 1988 they started Homeboy Industries as a way to provide jobs for gang members. They began with a bakery and expanded to include a silk screening business, Homegirl Café, Homeboy Maintenance, and Homeboy/Homegirl Merchandising. They thought Homeboy Plumbing would be a good idea but it turns out people didn't really want to welcome gang members into their homes. Who knew? It is now the largest gang intervention, rehab, and reentry program, in the world.

In his book, *TATTOOS ON THE HEART: THE POWER OF BOUNDLESS COMPASSION*, "G" or "G-Dog," as he is known by everyone, writes, "*Homeboy Industries is not for those who need help, only for those who want it.*" Many seek a job and a way out of gang life when they are released from prison or after the death of a close friend or family member in a gang-related shooting. Some decide to find a new way to live when their first child is born.

Homeboy Industries is a worksite and a therapeutic community; a training program and a business. All their services are free of charge. Perhaps G's biggest accomplishment is in forcing enemies to work together. If a gang member wants a job he or she has to learn to work and cooperate with someone from a rival gang. And of course, working together often leads to respect and even friendship.

Father Greg Boyle's job isn't easy nor is it always safe. He has had gang members swear at him, threaten him, and even pull a gun on him. He has buried hundreds of gang members and tried to comfort their weeping mothers. When a gang member was asked why Father Boyle continues to do this hard work, the young man was silent for a moment and then said, "God... I guess."

In his book he tells the story of walking to work one day. *"Closer to my office and before the alley was Junior's apartment. In his forties, Junior drank alcohol all day. He'd be nursing a large, cold one even at 7:30 a.m. as I arrived to open Homeboy Industries. Most days you'd see him hanging out his window, on the second floor, shirtless, no matter the weather. He was wiry and feisty and, despite my two decades of urging 'recovery' on him, alcohol didn't seem to obscure his goodness- it pickled it.*

One day as I'm walking past, lost in my own thoughts, I fail to see him. Then after I had gone beyond his apartment and the alley, Junior screams full-throttle, 'LOVE YOU G-DOG.'" This stops me in my tracks as it does a few other people. I'm always startled by the ready way folks and homies tell you that they love you. This was not always so available to me in my own, Irish-Catholic background. You knew people loved you, but words never brought you that knowledge. In the barrio, people tell you. I retrace my steps and am now standing under his windowsill, looking up.

'Thank you, Junior. That was a very nice thing to say.'

Junior waves me on, as if papally blessing me as my day begins.

'Oh come on now, G, you know,' he saying spinning his hand in a circular motion, 'You're in my... jurisdiction.'" (1)

Father Boyle laments the ways in which we draw lines and erect barriers to exclude others from our jurisdiction, from our sphere of acceptance. His challenge to the gang members- and to us as well- is to get us to abandon the territory we have staked out and replace it with turf more ample, inclusive, and as expansive as God's view of things.

I think what makes Father G-Dog's ministry to people most of us would run away from is simply this- he sees them, as they are, but more than that he sees them as they are meant to be. He looks at each one with the eyes of Jesus Christ. He acknowledges their crimes and offers them a way out. He challenges their sins and welcomes them to a new way of life- the life they have always been meant to live.

Let me tell you about Scrappy. Greg met him when he was fifteen and full of attitude and resentment. He refused any help from G or the church, disrespected the priest in the middle of a funeral, even aimed a gun at him in front of his gang. Needless to say, G was quite surprised when Scrappy showed up in his office one day.

Scrappy said, "Look, let's be honest with each other and talk man to man. You know I've never disrespected you."

Greg writes, "I figure, why not, I'm gonna go for it. 'Well, how about the time you walked out on my homily at Cuko's funeral?... or the time you pulled that gun on me?"

Scrappy looks genuinely perplexed by what I've just said and cocks and scrunches his face like a confused beagle. "Yeah, well... besides that," he says.

Then we do something we never have in our twenty years of knowing each other. We laugh. We really, truly laugh-

head-resting-on-my-desk laughter. We carry on until this runs its course, and then Scrappy settles into the core of his being, beyond the bravado of his status in his gang.

"I have spent the last twenty years building a reputation for myself... and now... I regret... that I even have one.'

And then in another first, he cries. But really, truly cries. He is doubled over, and the rocking seems to soothe the release of this great ache.

When the wailing stops and he comes up for air, he daubs his eyes and runs his sleeve across his nose. He finally makes eye contact.

'Now what do I do? I know how to sell drugs. I know how to gangbang. I know how to shank fools in prison. I don't know how to change the oil in my car. I know how to drive, but I don't know how to park. And I don't know how to wash my clothes except in the sink of a cell.'

I hire him that day, and he begins work the next morning on our graffiti crew."

Father Boyle writes, "The sacred place toward which God had nudged Scrappy all his life is not to be arrived at, but discovered. Scrappy did not knock on the door so God would notice him. No need for doors at all. Scrappy was already inside." (2)

Unknowingly, Scrappy had been in God's jurisdiction for his whole life. God was noticing; God was seeing Scrappy all along and was waiting for Scrappy to make eye contact.

Our stories from the Gospel of Mark are all about being noticed by Jesus. A few days earlier Jesus had entered the holy city of Jerusalem seated on a donkey.

People waved palm branches and welcomed him as a king. Since then he has mostly been teaching in the Temple and debating the religious leaders. You know what's coming, don't you? His arrest and crucifixion.

Just before our text for today, Jesus had a positive interaction with a scribe. They were discussing the greatest commandment and at the end of their conversation Jesus commends him and says, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." Scribes were among the religious leaders. They were skilled in writing and were celebrated for their wisdom and righteousness. They were interpreters and teachers of God's law.

Just as Jesus noticed the scribe he had a conversation with he also noticed other scribes walking by. He said to the crowd, *"Watch out for the religion scholars. They love to walk around in academic gowns, preening in the radiance of public flattery, basking in prominent positions, sitting at the head table at every church function. And all the time they are exploiting the weak and helpless. The longer their prayers, the worse they get. But they'll pay for it in the end."* (The Message)

Ouch! Sometimes it is better **not** to be noticed by Jesus. He wasn't condemning **all** scribes. He was calling to account those who took advantage of their position and harmed others while padding their own egos and bank accounts. In his day, scribes were basically politicians. They were supposed to be trusted leaders who represented the hard working people. They were supposed to look out for those who couldn't look out for themselves. Widows were especially vulnerable in those days. Once their husbands were gone they had no voice, no power, no money- nothing. If they had no family they depended on the goodness of their society to take care of them. But Jesus looks at some of the scribes and condemns them for devouring the property of the widow.

We just had an election- some votes are still being counted- we hope. This was the most expensive midterm election- EVER- in the United States. **\$5.2 Billion** was spent. Illinois has the "honor" of the most expensive race for governor- EVER. Billionaire Pritzker spent \$171 million to win the seat. That is about \$72 for each vote he received. Multi- millionaire Rauner spent a paltry \$85 million which is \$46 per vote. This is in a state where we went without a budget for nearly three years. And who was harmed? Those who are sick, young, old, and needy. People lost their jobs. Schools closed. Retirement homes, like the Church of the Brethren's Pleasant Hill Village in Girard, had to close down one of its units because the state didn't pay its bills. Yet we can spend \$256 million on an election. Do you think Jesus noticed that?

In our text from Mark, we find that Jesus noticed someone else that day in the Temple. *"Sitting across from the offering box, he was observing how the crowd tossed money in for the collection. Many of the rich were making large contributions. One poor widow came up and put in two small coins- a measly two cents. Jesus called his disciples over and said, 'The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they will never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford- she gave her all.'"*

You may be surprised to learn that this is not a text about stewardship- about how much money you pledge to the church or how much you put in the offering plate. In fact, I don't think it is about money at all. I think it is about commitment, about discipleship. The first thing to understand is that Jesus saw her. He may have been the only one who did. Widows were practically invisible. No one really paid attention to them.

The second thing to understand is that Jesus does not praise what she does- all he does is to describe it to his disciples. He doesn't say, "Look at how wonderful she is. She gave all she had to the very wealthy Temple and now will go home and starve to death."

I think the good news in this passage is that this woman was in Jesus' jurisdiction. She may have never known it- but Jesus did and so did his disciples. Jesus saw her. Jesus cared about her. And he called his disciples to care about her too. He knew who she was. He knew her status in Jerusalem and in the eyes of the religious leaders. She was at the bottom. And Jesus knew that some of the scribes were stealing the money and property of others just like her- and he condemned them for it. He saw her. He knew her. And he loved her.

Who is it that don't we see? Who can't we look in the eye? Jesus calls us to look and really see those who are overlooked by everyone else. We are called to advocate for a society that does not exploit the weak and leaves no one behind. We are called to create a nation with no walls; to celebrate the presence of everyone in God's jurisdiction.

What this means is that *God sees us- God sees you and welcomes and loves you for who you are. God looks you right in the eye and calls you to do the same for others created in God's own image*

In God's jurisdiction the length of your robe doesn't matter but the depth of your commitment does.

In God's jurisdiction it doesn't matter if everyone else knows your name because Jesus does.

In God's jurisdiction you don't seek out the most important seat at the head of the table, you make sure the table is big enough for everyone.

In God's jurisdiction you can't make a good impression with long prayers, just with heartfelt ones.

In God's jurisdiction it isn't about how much money you can pile into the offering plate, it is how much of yourself you willingly give to God.

Writer and pastor Eugene Peterson died last week at the age of 85. At his funeral his son Leif said that his Dad had only one sermon- that he had everyone fooled for 29 years of pastoral ministry and that for all his books he only had one message. It was a secret Leif said his Dad had let him in on early in life. It was a message that Leif said his Dad had whispered in his heart for 50 years, words that he had snuck into his room to say over him as he slept as a child:

"God loves you,

God is on your side.

God is coming after you.

God is relentless."

Whether we know it or not. Whether we like it or not.

We are in God's jurisdiction. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

End Notes:

- *TATTOOS ON MY HEART: THE POWER OF BOUNDLESS COMPASSION.* Gregory Boyle, Free Press. 2010. Pp. 129-130.
- Boyle, pp. 33-34.