

Sermon: *The Gospel of Kinship: All Things are Inventions of Holiness*

November 1st, 2020

Isaiah 33.2, Mark 3:31-35, John 15:12

“All things are inventions of holiness -- some more rascally than others.”

— Greg Boyle

I remember how stunned I was by the sight of the drone above our heads last month. It was a beautiful sunny Sunday and the images captured by the drone after our outdoor worship service showed some of us on the ground waving from our lawn chairs. Then, it flew up and up toward our magnificent church steeple complete with its bird nest. Soon, the drone eye took in the world beyond our patch of earth. It showed the flowing Connecticut river, the marshlands near Griswold Point to those shimmering waters that stretch out across Long Island Sound to the world beyond.

The world beyond Old Lyme.

I don't know about you, but especially because of the pandemic, it feels like my days are monotonous – mostly I stay around town, visiting folks outside or traveling familiar streets through familiar neighborhoods. Maybe we'll drive up Route 9 or along the shoreline towards New Haven or into New London but that's mostly it.

Those drone images reminded me again of life beyond my own ... a spiritual task that feels pretty necessary in these trying times.

Maria Popova, the journalist, writes, “I don't think it is possible to contribute to the present moment in any meaningful way while being wholly engulfed by it. It is only by stepping out of it, by taking a telescopic perspective, that we can then dip back in and do the work which our time asks of us.”

For many of us, due to social distancing the world has grown smaller. And thanks in good part to a church community like ours, we are often reminded of our links to the wider world.

To the people of Beit Sahour in the West Bank (Dr. MK).

To the friends we've known for decades in Green Grass, South Dakota.

To the community choir of South Africa.

To the children learning their lessons in Des Chapelles, Haiti, as the roosters crow.

And to our neighbors who arrived here from Congo, and Honduras, Mexico and Pakistan, among other countries.

To those we partner with in New London and New Haven.

When I recall those treasured relationships and connections, my heart is comforted and my sight expands once again past my own clouded windows.

In our book club this month, we read *Tattoos on the Heart* by the Jesuit priest, Gregory Boyle.¹ It's one of those rare books that had me sobbing in parts and belly laughing at others. It's a book that has changed my life and the way I think about ministry. It's an example to me of someone who is living out the gospel writ large.

For those of you who haven't heard of the author, Boyle, known as “Fr. G,” founded Homeboy/Girl Industries in the 80s in Los Angeles, California. It is today the largest gang-intervention program in the world. For three decades, Fr. G has walked beside these folks whom he’s loved, given jobs to, seen graduate from school, and try to repair their broken hearts. His community members call him many affectionate names from Fr. G to Dad, Pops, G-Dog – and he calls them “Son” and “Daughter.”

Boyle is the first to tell you if you visit his complex, Homeboy Industries, to pick up a muffin at their bakery, eat at the HomeGirl Cafe or learn about any one of their 15 businesses. They now employ hundreds of former gang members whom no one else would hire ... Homeboy Industries isn't a place “where we serve or rescue people or tell them that some day they might “measure up.”

Instead, it is a community of love where folks are “received” not “served,” and accompanied along the way. The message Boyle wants every person, every felon and every gangbanger to know is that you already have “enoughness” in you. You are already loved beyond measure.

They make T-shirts and hats with messages like:

Jobs not guns.

Stigma no more.

Now more than 15,000 gang members to date have participated in the 18-month program to rebuild their resilience. Most gang members have spent years of their lives already in juvenile detention camps or prison, so once enrolled in the program they are given training, support

¹ Gregory Boyle, S.J., *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (2010)

groups, jobs and opportunities to explore their interests. Ultimately, the program is about unconditional love, no questions asked.

“If love is the answer,” writes Boyle, “community is the context, and tenderness the methodology.”²

Tattoos on the Heart (and Fr. G’s latest book, *Barking to the Choir*), is a gospel parable for our day about love coming out of the ruins and what it really means to belong to one another.

Boyle shares story after story of gang members formerly imprisoned coming forward. They’ve endured the deep trauma of abuse, growing up in parentless households, or ones overwrought by pain, abandonment, addiction. Underlying all of it is the ever-present cruelty of poverty. He buried his 236th gang member to gun violence just a few weeks ago.

One of the many stories I remember reading had to do with a young guy, Chico. Like most of his peers, Chico came from an abusive home, lived on the streets, joined a gang and then found himself at a “probation camp” and from there, did time in prison. Eventually, Chico made it to Homeboy Industries and Boyle’s loving gaze. He was given a job and now the pride shines from a deep and real place on his face.

St. Ignatius of Loyola, the 14th century founder of the Jesuits, was big on finding God in all things. Ignatius, back in his day, discouraged his students from praying on the abstract, but entered the holiness of the world in real time with real people, shoulder to shoulder. He invited listeners to enter the gospel story directly in one’s heart and see what emerges.

Boyle states, “Ours is not a liberal or conservative view, it’s a holy, radical take precisely because it takes seriously what Jesus took seriously: inclusion, nonviolence, compassionate loving-kindness and acceptance.”³

What the Buddhists call the “illusion of separateness” is replaced with *kinship*.

Now, Boyle would reject this notion, but I’d put him right up there with Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa and our late Senator John Lewis.

The way he lives out his faith every day embracing the ones society rejects. Boyle calls them his family and over and over again, reassures them, that they are loved, deserving of love, full of love, even though they didn’t perhaps experience it or know it before.

² Gregory Boyle, S.J., *Barking at the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*, p. 85.

³ Gregory Boyle, S.J., *Barking*, pg. 155.

With attentive care, the stigma of demonization lessens overtime, transformed by the power of radical kinship.

As the poet Galway Kinnell wrote, “Sometimes it's necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness.”

I remember hearing Fr. G describe his encounter with one young father named Manny whom he'd welcomed into his office. Manny was worrying that because he didn't have a father anymore (he'd died of an overdose); he feared for his son and getting the fatherhood stuff “right.” So one afternoon, he comes in to tell Fr. G the good news. Manny had been playing with his 4-year-old son and suddenly, his son, resting his head on his dad's knee says, “I hope I'm just like you one day.”

The miracle of what love can do.

Many of Boyle's kids make it and many don't. He buried his 236th young person just a few weeks ago due to gun violence. Fr. G honors these beloved dead with stories of how much he loved them. He stands in awe of all they've endured.

He says, “You stand with the belligerent, the surly, the badly behaved until bad behavior is recognized for the language it is: the vocabulary of the deeply wounded and of those whose burdens are more than they can bear.”⁴

Isn't that the heart of today's scripture passage?

About a love that is here to stay no matter the outcome or achievement or lack thereof. About a love that is here to stay no matter what we have done or failed to do.

In Mark's gospel passage, Jesus is surrounded by crowds. His ministry has begun and he's wasting no time teaching and healing those on the margins. At one point, his immediate family, Mary and his brothers show up. They're waiting for him but Jesus has another idea. Jesus lets the crowd know that they are all his family. The walking wounded and the lost, the leper and the one abandoned at the edges.

“*You are all* my mothers, brothers and sisters,” Jesus tells them. (v.35)

I think this passage is less about Jesus dismissing or ignoring his immediate family and more about Jesus declaring the essence of his ministry.

Beyond our tribal borders (of today that are red, blue and purple) there is *kinship*.

⁴ *Barking to the Choir*, p179.

Kinship as a way of being in the world, a way of looking at one another and being in relationship. So that it is less about who can be served so that we can make a difference in someone's life (not that this type of service isn't needed), but more about the deeper question of connection: How can I, how can *we* become different as we get to know one another?

Here at FCCOL, our philosophy of service, too, is reflective of this ministry of partnering with others as opposed to the top-down model of the language of "mission."

As Jesus repeated in the gospel of John (15.15), "No longer do I call you servants, I call you friends."

Kinship is not about how accomplished we can be as a church, as a people, or individuals, and all about who we are standing farthest out at the margins of the world.

It's not about success, Boyle says. "Success and failure, ultimately, have little to do with living the gospel. Jesus just stood with the outcasts until they were welcomed or until he was crucified — whichever came first."

Writes local author Milton Brasher-Cunningham, "We lose our vocabulary for gratitude when fear becomes our common vernacular. We lose the words that matter most, and, as a result, we lose part of our humanity."⁵

I thought about this difference the other night as a group of us served takeout meals of pasta and meatballs to those on the streets of New London and the Community Meal Center there. We packaged 170 meals.

At one point, I stood in the lobby entrance and helped a man named Mark, who is employed by the center, to greet and serve lunches and dinners to guests. "I only get two days off a month," he told me. Because of COVID, everything is served as takeout. Mark would open the door and kindly ask each person what they wanted to drink, giving them choices before handing them their dinner. I noticed how he took his time with each person, asked how they were doing ... his manner and tone of voice was so compassionate, I was deeply moved by the dignity and welcome he gave each exhausted and masked face that came to the door.

The experience reminded me of the words of Mother Teresa, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."

Kinship changes all that.

⁵ Milton Brasher-Cunningham, *The Color of Together*, (2020).

The us vs. them trope really is changed to “just us.”

Actually, I think that’s part of why we keep reading the same scriptures stories week after week, trying to commit the deeds of love to heart. To be reminded of the prophetic voices of old that can help us meet this contemporary moment.

It is why we call each other and pray for each other to keep our connections alive during these COVID months and days of despair.

It’s **why** we volunteer at the SSKP and support the Homeless Hospitality Center.

It’s why we bring our kids to Sunday School in 40-degree weather and march for justice on Wednesday nights at 5:30 in neighboring towns and our own.

It’s why three years ago we said yes to being a sanctuary congregation and did whatever it took to make Malik, Zahida and Roniya feel at home in the basement of our church. It’s why we accompany them still and others along the way whose dignity has been ferociously denied.

It’s why we’re gathered here today in prayer to wonder out loud and in the silence of our own hearts about what it still means to be a community of God’s Kinship in this rocky world of COVID and chaos.

And why we honor that great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us, whose light we seek to follow in the dark.

As we head into Election Day and Week and the uncertainty that lies ahead, we can count on this: That our kinship with one another is what binds us. Whatever brokenness we might carry ourselves or for one another, we belong to one another and God is in the midst. In the midst as we rub elbows in greeting, or stare out at each other on Zoom, blessing the spaces between us. Standing with those on the edges until all the edges are erased.

Make no mistake, as one of Fr. Greg’s homies said to him one day, “You are my *real Pops* now and our love, it’s here to stay, man!”

Amen!