

## AN EXTRAORDINARY LIFE: FATHER GREGORY BOYLE

Matthew 5:43-48

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Father Gregory Boyle was assigned to be the parish priest at the Dolores Mission Church in Los Angeles in 1988, in a neighborhood where there was the highest concentration of gang activity in the world. He's been there ever since, and he has learned a lot in 30 years about the way gangs work. Especially this: no one who has an ounce of hope ever joins a gang. Gangs in US cities are not focused on issues or conflict, like the violence in Northern Ireland or the Middle East. Gangs in US cities are not "about" anything. "No hopeful kid has ever joined a gang. Not once, not ever." Gang involvement is about a lethal absence of hope. It's about kids who can't imagine a future for themselves. "It's about kids who aren't seeking anything when they join a gang. It's about the fact that they're always fleeing something, always, without exception."

Like Jermaine. His mom was a prostitute and his father was killed when Jermaine, the oldest of three brothers, was nine. After his father's funeral, his mother rented an apartment, deposited all the boys there, walked to the door, and closed it. They never saw her again.

Father Greg has written two books, Tattoos on the Heart and Barking to the Choir. (*Note - all of the material in this sermon is taken from his writings.*) They are not books about him or his accomplishments; they are stories about the people with whom he is privileged to work and serve. He believes that each person is sacred and each person's story is sacred. Once you hear their stories, you understand their situation and

you stand not in judgment but in awe of the burdens they are carrying. What are the kinds of hell that these young people are fleeing? I can only bear to tell a few of their stories.

A young man named Spider, now in his mid-thirties, has spent most of his adult life drug-addicted and incarcerated due to drug violence. Here's his story. "I was five, playing with matches, like kids do. This made my mom mad. So she dragged me into the kitchen, turned on the burner on the top of the stove and held my hand on top of the red-hot burner until I passed out. That's why I joined a gang."

Curly graduated from the school Homeboy Industries runs. He just enrolled in community college. He tells Father Greg his story. His father came home from work one day and asked Curly and his siblings who had stolen his batteries. Well, little Curly had a toy requiring two batteries, and had found them in his father's dresser drawer. He tentatively said, "I did." His father walked over to him, grabbed his arm, and snapped it in two. Curly was six years old.

These are the kinds of stories Father Greg tells. As a nine-year-old, Andres came home from school to find that his mother (presumably someone living with mental illness) had packed up her things and left her only son. For the next two years he was homeless and a dumpster diver, sleeping on park benches. After foster care, gang involvement, and detention, Andres wandered into Homeboy Industries and began their program. One of the therapists arrived to work on a Monday with a box of Triscuits because Andres was always hungry. "You brought these for me?" Andres asked in disbelief. He was stunned. "You mean, you think of me when I'm not here? Wow. I never pictured that anyone would think of me when they're not here."

Chuy is a success story. He began in the program as all do, in janitorial services, then he worked in the tattoo removal department. After his 18 months were up, he found a good-paying job with the help of their employment services department. On his last day at Homeboy, he asked to address everyone at the morning meeting. He directed his remarks to the trainees present. "All of you are diamonds covered in dust. This is where you can wipe the dust off." In his time at Homeboy Industries, he had experienced a true liberation and discovered his truest self. He learned how to be loyal to his own life.

Homeboy Industries provides hope, training and support to formerly gang-involved and previously incarcerated men and women allowing them to redirect their lives and become contributing members of the community. Each year over 10,000 former gang members from across Los Angeles come through Homeboy Industries' doors in an effort to make a positive change. They are welcomed into a community of mutual kinship, love, and a wide variety of services ranging from tattoo removal to anger management to parenting classes. Full-time employment is offered for more than 200 men and women at a time through an 18-month program that helps them re-identify who they are in the world, offers job training so they can move on from Homeboy Industries knowing they are persons with value and a future.

It started small. Soon after Father Greg arrived in the neighborhood, he realized he needed to provide jobs and education as alternatives to the gangs and their senseless violence. They started a small job program that has grown into one of the largest, most comprehensive and most successful gang intervention, rehabilitation and re-entry programs in the country.

Their organizational chart and their business plan are impressive. But it all starts with the faith, the theology, the biblical scholarship and the philosophy of Father Greg. He engages the imagination of former gang members and helps them envision an exit ramp off the freeway of violence addiction and incarceration. His core belief is that that community is the answer. When you create a true sense of community wherein all people feel a sense of kinship, wherein all people's stories and lives are valued with the highest degree of dignity and respect, people have the opportunity to change. He's not soft. He holds people accountable. He's had to lay people off and kick people out, but most of the time, love wins. His love for the people with whom he's working transforms them. That and therapy and jobs. Early on, he began saying, "Nothing stops a bullet like a job." He talks business owners into giving his graduates a chance at employment.

Once Father Greg was invited to speak to 600 social workers in Richmond, Virginia at a day-long in-service on gangs. He invited two trainees to go with him. One of them was Sergio. Sergio was in his mid-twenties, a tattooed gang member who had served considerable time in prison. He also had been homeless for a stretch and an active heroin addict for a longer one. He was drinking and sniffing glue at age eight, which eventually led to crack, PCP, and finally heroin. He was first arrested at the age of nine for assault and breaking and entering, jumped into a gang at twelve, and did 2 1/2 years for stabbing his mom's boyfriend who tried to abuse him. He began at Homeboy in the janitorial crew but in time became a valued member of the substance abuse crew. He told this group of social workers his story. "I guess you could say my mom and I didn't get along. I think I was six when she looked at me and said, 'Why don't you just kill yourself? You're such a burden to me.' I think I was nine when she drove me to

the deepest part of Baja, California, walked me up to the door of an orphanage and said, 'I found this kid.' I was there 90 days before my grandmother convinced my mom to tell me where I was and she came and rescued me. My mom beat me every single day of my elementary school years with things you could imagine and a lot of things you couldn't. Every day my back was bloodied and scarred. In fact, I had to wear 3 t-shirts to school each day. The first one because the blood would seep through. the second because you could still see it. Finally with the third t-shirt you couldn't see the blood. Kids at school would make fun of me, wearing 3 t-shirts in 100 degree weather. I wore three t-shirts well into my adult years because I was ashamed of my wounds; I didn't want anyone to see them. But now I welcome my wounds. After all, how can I help others to heal if I don't welcome my own wounds?"

Father Greg knows these stories, and so he knows that no one has chosen the life of the gang. He puts a human face on each gang member. Recently he's been reading the book of Acts, and paying attention to how that book of the Bible tells us how to measure the health of our communities. These phrases stand out to him when he reads the description of the early church: "See how they love one another." "There was no needy person among them." "And awe came upon everyone." He concludes this way, "It would seem that, quite possibly, the ultimate measure of health in any community might well reside in our ability to stand in awe of what folks have to carry rather than in judgment at how they carry it." He hears these heartbreaking stories and stands in awe that anyone can withstand such horror and have the courage to walk through his doors.

He sees young people learning to become parents when they didn't have parents themselves...certainly not good parents.

He sees the cycle of violence and addiction being broken.

For him, his work is inspired by Jesus. Jesus was always hopeful about widening the circle of compassion and dismantling the barriers that exclude. He stood with the sinner, the leper, and the ritually impure to usher in some new remarkable inclusion, the very kinship of God. Living the gospel, then, is less about "thinking outside the box" than about choosing to live in this ever-widening circle of inclusion.

Father Greg certainly doesn't consider himself a saint or a savior. Homeboy Industries uses this language: "we don't rescue people, we receive them." The message is not, "You can measure up someday"; the message is, "Who you are is enough." Before entering their 18-month program, and even after they are accepted, they are drug tested. When they are drug-free, they can begin to confront the pain of their stories and let go of the hatred for their gang rivals. One program candidate was in Father Greg's office one day. "I've decided to be determined, he said." "Will you test clean?" "All I have in my system is hope; I will test positive for that."

It's not an easy road, not even after graduating from the program and finding a job. Being poor means living in a continual state of acute crisis. The poor are always on the verge of calamity and catastrophe. One appliance failure, one missed paycheck, one car repair bill can cause their whole world to fall apart. Father Greg sees his graduates having to choose between feeding their kids or paying their rent. He says that watching them navigate that kind of stress is awe-inspiring.

A man named Cruz spent his last dollars taking a train to visit Father Greg sixty miles to Los Angeles from San Bernardino, where he had relocated his girlfriend and newborn to avoid the dangers and desperation of his previous gang life. He had a part-time job but could not get his boss to give him more hours. Now he sits in Father Greg's office rattling off a list of the pressures and needs of his family. With no safety net in sight, he speaks of no food in the fridge, no lights, landlord looming, no bus fare. When he finishes this breathless account, Cruz stops, shaken and exhausted. He grows teary-eyed and says quietly, 'I just keep waiting.' 'For what, son?' 'For the last to be first.'

One day Father Greg takes two young women, Shameeka and Abby, on a speaking trip to San Francisco, where he's been asked to speak to a thousand judges. "They are big girls, tattooed gang members who have been in prison. I simply introduce them. They tell their stories, pausing often to cry as they tell the stories of their lives which have been filled with terror - torture, abuse, abandonment, and violence. The judges are riveted; they stand and applaud. We fly home that afternoon and when we land and get in the car, I call my 87-year-old mother to tell her I'm safely back at home. "Tell me again what you were doing in San Francisco," she asks. "We were giving a talk to a bunch of judges, and these two wonderful women helped me give a workshop." After more chatting, they said goodbye. After a moment, Shameeka, sitting in the front seat, lets out a "Huh." "What?" "Oh, nothing." "No, what?" "Well, just now, you called us wonderful women." "Yeah? So?" Shameeka enters some quiet, soulful place. "I don't know. When you say it, I believe you."

Here's what Father Greg said to a reporter recently: "My life is about walking with Jesus and being a companion. And I haven't found anything that's brought me more life or joy than standing with Jesus, but also with the particularity of standing in the lowly place, with the easily despised and the readily left out, and with the demonized so that the demonizing will stop, and with the disposable so that the day will come when we stop throwing people away. We are trying to create a community God would recognize. I've never been given greater access to the tenderness of God than through these thousands of men and women I've been privileged to know. The day simply won't ever come when I am nobler or more compassionate or asked to carry more than they. They are diamonds covered in dust."