

April 10, 2016
3rd Sunday after Easter

I will praise you, Lord, for you have rescued me

*When our souls feel their worth, we will come to know the truth
about ourselves, and we will like what we find there*

Last Sunday, we considered how Jesus is always on the side of the crucified ones, how God is on the side of the pain and goes wherever the pain is, that God becomes most real to us in times of pain.

A Story

Today, I would like to share with you a contemporary story of God rescuing us, of God going to where the pain is. It's a review by Jesuit Fr. Thomas Rausch, professor of theology at Loyola Marymount University, of a book titled, "*Tattoos on the Heart*." This review can be found in the current issue of the National Catholic Reporter.

"A couple of years ago, I was rushing through Los Angeles International Airport, hoping to grab a quick coffee and a scone at Starbucks before my flight. But as I entered the American Airlines concourse, what I saw was a Homegirl Café, busy with several Mexican-American girls waiting on the early morning commuters. Gosh, I thought to myself, Greg has created a whole industry.

"Greg is Fr. Greg Boyle, a Jesuit brother and friend. He's known to all of Los Angeles and far beyond for his work with the "*homies*," the homeboys and homegirls whose lives have been so marked by the culture of gang violence in East LA. After a year's contact with Bolivia's poor, Greg asked to be assigned to Dolores Mission, the poorest parish in the Los Angeles archdiocese in the midst of two large housing projects and some eight gangs.

"Realizing how many young lives were blunted by the gangs, he began riding his bike through the neighborhood in the evening, trying to get to know the young people, who at first ignored him. But after he visited them in jail or the hospital, they began to realize he was there for them. They started calling him "*G*," for Greg, or "*G-Dog*."

"Gang members soon began arriving at Mission Dolores looking for a job. One of them, just released from prison, arrived with "*_____ THE WORLD*" tattooed on his forehead. Greg suggested it might be difficult for him to get a job at McDonald's. So began one of Greg's first services - a tattoo-removal program.

"The stories he tells would break your heart. There was Jason, a young crack dealer, the son of two addicts, who, after rejecting a number of invitations, finally showed at Greg's office and with his help found a job. Having left his anger behind him, he eventually had a home and family, and was looking forward to his daughter's baptism. He had bought her a new dress. A week before the baptism, he was gunned down in the streets by someone from his past.

“Or Luis, also a drug dealer who was hired by Greg to work at the bakery, and with his natural leadership ability was soon appointed foreman. He took being a father seriously, got a small apartment, the first home he had ever had, and with it a whole new life. One evening while loading his car, he was shot and killed by some gang members who found themselves in his neighborhood. As Greg said at his funeral, Luis *"came to know the truth about himself and liked what he found there."* In 1988, he buried his first victim of gang violence. Twenty years later, he had presided at more than 165 such funerals for young men from the neighborhood.

“There are too many stories like those of Jason and Luis, kids whom Greg befriended, young men who through unconditional love and care discovered the truth about themselves, turned their lives around, rejoiced in their children, and looked to a future with hope.

“They came from broken homes, abusive, addicted or absent parents, dysfunctional families. Lacking love and self-respect, they were burdened with shame. You find yourself identifying with them, marveling at their humor, their resiliency, only to have them end up one more victim of the violence of the streets. Like the 16-year-old girl, pregnant, who says to Greg, *"I just want to have a kid before I die."* Or Benito, a funny, energetic 12-year-old killed in a drive-by.

“Many do turn their lives around. My favorite is about Bandit, well-named for *"being at home in all things illegal."* He came to see Greg after being locked up for selling crack. Greg took him to a job developer, who got him an unskilled, entry-level job at a warehouse. Now fifteen years later, he runs the warehouse, has his own home, a wife and three kids. He wants Greg to bless his oldest daughter because she’s going to college at Humboldt, the first in her family to do so, and wants to study forensic psychology. Bandit says, *"I'll be her first client."* He adds with tears in his eyes, *"I'm proud of myself. All my life, people called me a lowlife, a bueno para nada. I guess I showed 'em."*

“Greg calls this the slow work of God, helping the soul to feel its worth. It is the strategy of Jesus, not centered on taking the right stand, but rather on standing in the right place -- with the outcasts and those relegated to the margins. Boyle meets people who are living heroic lives, like Rigo’s mother, who every Sunday takes seven buses to visit him in prison while he served his time. Rigo's father used to beat him, once with a pipe.

“G brings a depth of spiritual wisdom to the book. He writes about a God who loves us passionately, about the shame and "dis-grace" that cripples so many young people growing up in poverty and violence, and the toxic effects of neglect. He writes about giving young people time to do the slow work of finding themselves. He quotes Mother Teresa who once said, *'We are not called to be successful, but faithful.'*

“From its original location in the old bakery building, Homeboy Industries has grown to an \$8.5 million glass-and-concrete headquarters in a gang-neutral location on the edge of Chinatown. It houses Homeboy Bakery and a beautiful Homegirl Café, along with a catering service, various craft industries, and a Homeboy Diner at City Hall. It currently employs 250-300 former gang members, while some 1,000 from the community take advantage of its services each month, including 500 monthly treatments at its clinic for tattoo removal.

“The stories in his book, told originally in Boyle's homilies at Mass in some 25 detention centers, probation camps and juvenile facilities, brought tears to my eyes numerous times, as they will to yours. This is a holy book about the power of unconditional love and compassion.”

The slow work of God is to help the soul to feel its worth

God is on the side of the pain and goes wherever the pain is; God becomes most real to us in times of pain. Only by experiencing this are we able to move outside of our own success systems into the powerlessness that is in all of us.

*When our souls feel their worth, we will come to know the truth
about ourselves, and we will like what we find there*

We praise you, Lord, for rescuing us