

“Meeting the world with a loving heart will determine what we find there.”

*Tattoos on the Heart*, Gregory Boyle

I've finally gotten around to reading a book that many of my colleagues managed to read 10 years ago. *Tattoos on the Heart*, by Gregory Boyle details the life of a priest whose Los Angeles parish sits between two major housing projects and at the intersection of several gang territories. His essays chronicle his experiences serving that particular Hispanic community — funerals and protests, drugs and guns — he's seen it all. And by the end of the first chapter, it's clear that he's doing “real” ministry. Beginning in the 80's and moving through time, his parish begins to address the real needs of their community. They begin with a bakery, that evolves into a Café, that becomes job training and GED classes, that pays for tattoo removal, all coordinated by an army of case workers. Homeboy Industries has grown into “the largest gang rehabilitation and re-entry program in the world,” according to their website.

Indeed, Father Boyle travels all over the world talking about the work this non-profit does, always taking 2 or 3 clients with him to tell their stories. And it connects with folks. They see real results and hear stories of hope and resurrection. And while it's tempting to attribute the success of Homeboy to Father Boyle's singular direction, he makes clear that this outreach comes from within the parish itself, originally rising from the mothers and grandmothers who fought to get their children to stay in school, to stay sober, to reach for more. It was these small groups, these base communities, that provided the energy and impetus to create another way.

And Boyle is painfully honest about his shortcomings. In the beginning, he would get on his bike “in the middle of the night, in the projects, trying to put out fires...” (125), trying to save the world. And it led to burn-out. Nor does he shy away from admitting that these programs don't work for everyone, that they can't serve folks who don't want to be served or for whom their services aren't a good fit. But in essay after essay, in story after story, we see a thread that winds its way through all of the work of Homeboy Industries — “Meeting the world with a loving heart will determine what we find there.”

Father Boyle learns as much about his own foibles as he does about the culture of this pocket of L.A.. He learns not to assume. He approaches the gang-bangers he works with, not as miscreants who need their lives forcibly re-arranged for them, but as people whose lives are often filled with trauma and who react to that trauma in the only ways they know how. He doesn't shy away from holding folks responsible for their own choices, but he does treat them as beloved children of God, created in the divine image and called good.

So if you haven't picked this one up yet, I'd recommend you do so. If only to be reminded that the human condition is a tapestry of light and dark and it's best to see the whole of it all as beautiful.

Blessings,

Pastor Heather