



"The Business of Restoration"
Scripture – Mark 5:21-43
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, June 27, 2021

In his memoir *Tattoos on the Heart*, Father Gregory Boyle tells the story of Lencho, a gang member who shows up at his office door two days after being released from prison.¹ Lencho has been locked up for 10 years — tried as an adult for a crime committed when he was fourteen. Now, at twenty-four, he is a sight to behold. Father Boyle describes the young man sitting across from him:

His arms are all "sleeved out" — every inch covered in tattoos. His neck is blackened by the name of his gang — stretching from jawbone to collarbone. His head is shaved and covered with alarming tattoos. Most startling of all (though impressive, Father Boyle admits) are two exquisitely etched devil's horns planted on his forehead.

"You know ... I'm having a hard time finding a job," Lencho says. Father Boyle stares at the heavily-tattooed gang member and thinks, "Well, maybe we can put our heads together on this one." He's about to nudge Lencho toward the tattoo removal clinic when the young man speaks up: "I've never had a job in my life — been locked up since I was a kid." So Father Boyle offers him a job. He tells Lencho to show up the next day at Homeboy Silkscreen, one of the social enterprises that make up Homeboy Industries. You might have heard of Homeboy Industries; it's the largest gang rehabilitation program in the world. Father Boyle started this organization some thirty years ago, while serving as a priest in the community that had the highest concentration of gang activity in Los Angeles. He has been working with people like Lencho ever since, offering opportunities and providing services for homies and home girls seeking to transform their lives. A couple days later, Father Boyle calls over to Homeboy Silkscreen to check on their newest employee. "How's it feel to be a workin' man?" he asks Lencho.

"It feels proper," he replies. " [In fact, I just keep telling people about it.] Yesterday, after work, I'm sitting at the back a' the bus, dirty and tired, and, I mean, I just couldn't help myself. I kept turning to total strangers — 'Just comin' back, first day on the job ... Just getting off — my first day at work.'" Father Boyle imagines the scene on the bus: mothers clutching their kids a little closer as this tattooed gang-member leans in to share his news; fellow travelers muttering under their breath, "What a waste of a perfectly good job." After all, this is the way of the world. We walk around convinced that some people are less worthy, less deserving based on a whole host of reasons: the circumstances of someone's birth; the neighborhood he comes from; the degree she doesn't hold; the way that person speaks or dresses or presents themselves to the world, the choices someone has made. In too many instances, people start believing these lies about *themselves* — that they're less worthy, less deserving

¹ Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2010), pp. 191-192

of kindness, of love, of grace. And, so, the work of healing people — of healing communities — begins with telling a different truth. It starts with becoming “what child psychiatrist Alice Miller calls ‘enlightened witnesses’ — people who through their kindness, tenderness, and focused, attentive love return folks to themselves.” This work is central to Father Boyle’s ministry with former gang-members. He describes it this way: “At Homeboy Industries, we seek to tell each person this truth: they are exactly what God had in mind when God made them — and then we watch, from this privileged place, as people inhabit this truth.” This is exactly what happens to Lencho during that bus-ride home after his first day on the job — he begins to inhabit this truth. As Father Boyle reflects, Lencho “is returned to himself and [he] announces this with clarion voice at the back of a bus.”

As it happens, this work is central to the ministry of Jesus as well; he is in the business of restoration — of returning people to themselves. We see it here, in this marvelous set of stories from the Gospel of Mark. When we meet Jesus in today’s passage, he has just returned from the country of the Gerasenes on the far side of the Sea. While there he’d encountered another in need of healing — a man with an unclean spirit who’d been living among the tombs. The townspeople had tried to bind this man with chains, but the demoniac would wrench them apart; nothing could restrain him. So, when Jesus turned up on Gerasene shores, the man ran and bowed down before the Son of the Most High God. And Jesus liberated him from the unclean spirit’s clutches and sent him on his way, saying, “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you” (5:19). And now, Mark tells us, Jesus has crossed over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, returning to Jewish territory and to the crowds of clamoring hopefuls who’ve heard about his power to heal. As soon as Jesus steps out of the boat, another man falls at his feet. This one is very different from the Gerasene Demoniac; he has *not* been relegated to the graveyard on the outskirts of town; rather, he spends his days at the center of Jewish life. Jairus is a leader in the synagogue. He is a man with status and authority, but he has been brought low in desperation. Jairus falls at Jesus’ feet and begs the healer repeatedly, “My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.”

So Jesus follows Jairus to the home where his beloved daughter lies on her deathbed. But, before he can reach the girl, his journey is interrupted by an unnamed, unaccompanied woman who, probably, thought she could go unnoticed. She comes up behind Jesus in the crowd and just reaches out her hand. No doubt this woman is in desperate need of relief and release; after all, she’s been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years straight. She has just as much reason as the tormented demoniac and the tormented father to fall prostrate at the feet of Jesus. But she doesn’t. She doesn’t approach Jesus with boldness. Instead this long-suffering woman sneaks up behind him under the cover of the crowd and touches his cloak. And, immediately, her hemorrhage stops. She is cured. She has received what she came for. But this unnamed woman cannot slip away unseen. “Who touched my clothes?” Jesus asks. He knows in his body that power has gone forth from him; she knows in her body that this power has cured her disease. So, in fear and trembling, she presents herself to Jesus. Now — *now!* — she falls prostrate at his feet, and she tells him her whole truth. I wonder — What truth does she speak? I expect she tells Jesus what Mark tells us: How she spent years going from doctor to doctor to doctor, but nothing ever came of it. Eventually the money dried up, but the issue of blood did not. Perhaps she tells Jesus how she’s been made to feel worthless because — in a culture where offspring are the measure of a woman’s worth — she’s been unable to bear children while her body bleeds. Maybe she talks about feeling cast aside, forgotten, despised. We do not know what stories she shares. We only know this: the woman tells Jesus the whole truth. And Jesus responds with mercy; he utters a different truth. “*Daughter,*” he says. “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” The woman has already been cured; her hemorrhage had stopped when she touched Jesus’ cloak. But now — it seems — she is healed, she is made well. For — in claiming her as kin, in promising her peace — Jesus restores this woman to health, to community, to wholeness. He gives her the gift of new life — life that is just as full, just as transformed as the *resurrected* life he offers the daughter of Jairus. Because — remember? — after this healing, Jesus continues his journey to Jairus’ house ... Despite the

fact that messengers come to tell Jairus his daughter has died; despite the fact that mourners laugh at Jesus when he says the child is merely sleeping. After healing the woman in the crowd, Jesus stands at the deathbed and resurrects the breathless little girl; he restores her to health, to community, to wholeness.

Yes, Jesus is in the business of restoring people to wholeness. No matter who comes in search of healing: whether a foreigner relegated to the tombs; or a desperate father who — despite his authority — is powerless to save his little girl; or an unnamed woman who has spent twelve long years searching for a cure ... No matter who comes to Jesus, no matter what truth they lay at his feet — Jesus restores people to wholeness, to life. Because he proclaims a different truth. *This* truth: You are worthy. No matter your circumstances, no matter the condition that causes you pain, you are worthy of grace, of mercy, of love. And, by acting upon this truth, Jesus heals those who come to him, body and soul. He frees them from torment, from grief, from suffering, from the very clutches of death. He frees them to enjoy the wholeness which God intends. In other words, Jesus returns people to themselves. Christ is still in the business of restoration — of returning people to themselves. It's a little harder to see in this day and age, when miracles seem few and far between ... at least ones that fit our narrow definition of the term. But the healing ministry of Christ continues. Not-so-much in unexplainable cures for chronic ailments, or in breathless bodies returned to life. But we glimpse healing in other ways, wherever grace and mercy and love abound. Whenever people are freed to enjoy the wholeness God intends. In moments when acts of kindness and tenderness and focused, attentive love return folks to themselves.

When Father Gregory Boyle spoke here, at Westminster, a few years ago, he told a story about one of these moments:² Father Boyle had been invited to speak at Gonzaga University and, as is often the case, he brought along two Homies to share their stories. One of these homies — a tall, skinny 'drink of water' named Mario — is the most tattooed person who has ever worked at Homeboy Industries. The tats cover his arms, his neck, his shaved head, his forehead, cheeks, chin; he even has tattoos on his eyelids. As they were walking through the airport in route to Gonzaga, passersby would stare in horror and veer to the far side of the terminal ... Which is not surprising, but it is interesting. Because, as Father Boyle put it, "If you were to go to Homeboy ... and ask who is the kindest, most gentle, tender soul here ... they'd say 'Mario' ... Mario is proof that only the soul that ventilates the world with tenderness has any shot at changing the world."

At Gonzaga University, Father Boyle was set to speak to a large audience — about a thousand people. And he asked the two homies to start things off by sharing their stories. They were nervous — terrified, in fact. Especially Mario. But they got up and told their stories — "Stories of terror and torture and violence and abuse of every imaginable kind. Honest to God," Father Boyle exclaimed, "Honest to God, if their stories had been flames you'd have to keep your distance, otherwise you'd get scorched. I would not have survived a day of their childhoods." After Father Boyle gave his talk, he invited the two homies to join him on stage for the Question and Answer session. And, immediately, a young woman in the crowd stood up. "This question is for Mario," she said. And Mario clutched the microphone and, with a voice shaking in trepidation, responded, "yes?" She went on: "You say you're a father and you have a son and a daughter who are about to enter their teenaged years ... What wisdom do you impart to them? You know, what advice do you give them?" Mario closed his eyes and he clutched the microphone more tightly. Everyone in the room could sense the emotions rising within him. "I just ..." he blurted out, before retreating back into himself. And, then — in fear and trembling — he spoke his truth. The whole truth: "I just don't want my kids to turn out to be like me." And there was silence. And then, the young woman who'd asked the question stood and, with tears in her eyes, she responded: "Why wouldn't you want your kids to turn out to be like you? You are loving, you are kind, you are gentle, you are wise. I hope your kids

² While Fr. Boyle told this story during his presentation at Westminster Presbyterian Church on September 9, 2017, the quotes come from a presentation he gave at St. Louis University. See: Father Gregory Boyle, "Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion," November 2, 2017 (<https://youtube.com/watch?v=V-lyMc-eVgU>).

turn out to be like you." And, in an instant, a thousand total strangers stood, and they would not stop clapping. And all Mario could do was hold his face in his hands, so overwhelmed that this room full of perfect strangers had decided to return him to himself. In that moment, amidst the din of a thousand strangers clapping, a different truth was proclaimed: You are worthy. You are worthy. And healing took place. Yes, Christ is still in the business of restoration — of returning people to themselves. Wherever grace and mercy and love abound. Whenever people are freed to enjoy the wholeness God intends. Christ is there — restoring people to community, restoring people to life.

Prayers of the People – Bob Stoddard

Eternal God, Creator of all that was, is, and is to be, we worship you; we praise your Holy Name and humbly come before you in awe to offer up our collective prayers. Ever present God, to whom we turn in the face of overwhelming tragedy, the images of the collapsed Surfside Condo flash us back to the horror of 9/11 when so many innocent lives were lost in the blink of an eye. We can only stand by and pray that first responders find at least some survivors in the rubble. Keep them safe as they search. We are thankful so many residents escaped harm. Be with families and friends of the 159 "unaccounted for" who anxiously fear the worst. And receive into your eternal care the souls of all who died so suddenly.

As we leave the darkness of COVID behind and enter the welcome solstice light of summer, restore our spirits and renew our hope. We are so thankful, O God, to return to normalcy, once again hugging loved ones and seeing friends and colleagues in person rather than on Zoom and Skype. We are grateful, Gracious Lord, to be among the first worldwide to be fully vaccinated, but we remember and mourn those within our church family as well family members and close friends for whom the vaccine came too late. Merciful God, comfort those who mourn and grant them healing over time. We pray too for all who remain under the dark cloud of COVID; for those in intensive care and on ventilators on other continents; those dying with no care at all, and those still crying out for the vaccine. Enable governments and international agencies to expedite the sharing, shipping and administering of vaccines to end this pandemic as soon as possible.

These long days of summer heat focus us anew, O Lord, of our fast warming globe and rapidly changing climate. We see what is happening as birds and animals vanish, invasive insects kill whole species of trees, sea levels erode shoreline and drought, fires, storms, and floods ravish the land. We understand why this is happening. We know what we must do to change course, We need only the will to do it. Stir us, Holy Spirit, to act *now* while we still can.

Source of all life, help us end the plague of violence whereby homegrown terrorists attack our government. Keep us, Good Shepherd, from being led astray by conspiracy theories and false prophets who seek to empower and enrich themselves at the expense of national stability and our common good. As summer temperatures rise, so does carnage in urban ghettos where black and brown people are confined, and teenage girls settle arguments with guns while boys in cars shoot boys on bikes. May our work for peace and justice encourage holistic ways to address the root causes of poverty and violence and heal the wounds of our society. Meanwhile, may we not disparage the police for the actions of a few. Rather, may we back those who, at constant risk to themselves, try to prevent bloodshed, maintain the peace and bring about justice for victims of crime. We pray especially for the rapid recovery of Wilmington Officers Bartolo, Giles and Pratts and give thanks that they survived being shot in the line of duty.

With all these concerns in mind, Almighty God, we offer special prayers today for Joe, our President, and Jill, our First Lady, and for John, our governor and Michael our mayor, May they make wise decisions and provide

courageous leadership in these perilous times. Grant them strength and stamina to bear the heavy burdens of governance and keep them safe. We pray as well for our Congress, for Charles and Mitchell, Nancy and Kevin as well as for our representatives Tom, Chris, and Lisa, May they use their prerogatives and influence to foster bi-partisanship, so our Congress governs more effectively for the good of our county and planet. Forgive us God, for taking our democracy for granted when so many have suffered and died to preserve it for us. May we exercise our democratic rights to the fullest and maintain this precious, but fragile system of government so all Americans have an equal voice in governing themselves. And may we all make decisions based on the teachings of Jesus and God- given common sense, modelling our lives on the life and love of Christ, Our Lord, in whose name we pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And, lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen