

## August Book Summary

Summarized by Dan Brent

### *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*

Gregory Boyle, Free Press, 2010, 213 pp., \$14 (paperback)

Father Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit. He was a parish priest appointed as pastor of Dolores Mission in 1986. It's the poorest parish in the Los Angeles Archdiocese. The Pico and Aliso projects are part of it, virtually all Hispanic. They house gangs – lots and lots of them – and the pastor was reaching out to them and inviting his parishioners to do the same. There are, he reports, 1100 gangs with about 86,000 members in Los Angeles County.

The major initiative is Homeboy Industries started in 1988. The idea is to provide jobs to gang members who want to move in a positive direction. Boyle quotes David: "I know I can fly. I just need to catch a gust o' wind." Homeboy Industries wants to be that gust. They create silkscreen products, do graffiti removal, tattoo removal, printing, etc. The motto is "A job is how you stop a bullet."

Not everyone thought it was a swell idea. There were death threats; in their neighborhood, those were taken seriously. One night the bakery burned down. Lencho worked there. He arrived to see and sobbed. "This was his reason to get up in the morning." Arson was suspected but it turned out to be old wiring. They rebuilt it.

Luis gave up drugs to take up baking. He became a foreman, married and was a proud father. Then he was shot to death.

Rigo sobbed in telling "G" (as they called Father Greg) about his mother coming every weekend to visit him in jail. "Seven buses. She takes ... seven ... buses. Imagine." G sees her as God's agent telling Rico how much he is loved.

In a 3 AM call, Cesar wants to know whether G has been a father to him. "Oh, hell, yea, I say. In this early morning call Cesar did not discover that he has a father. He discovered that he is a son worth having." In these incidents, Boyle habitually sees "the One who can't take his eyes off of you. Marinate in the vastness of that!"

Always Boyle is trying to build up the self esteem that has been stripped from these young people by their environment and history. "Guilt, of course, is feeling bad about one's actions, but shame is feeling bad about oneself." He quotes one of his homies (as he refers to his kids): "My spirit is so sore. It hurts to be me."

But dignity is conferred by God and can't be taken away. "One hopes to model not the one-false-move God but the no-matter-whatness of God" who "looks beyond our fault and sees our need."

Most of the homies go by nicknames. After several false starts, G finally got Napito's name by asking for "the name your mom uses when she's not pissed off at you."

Benito was only twelve. He's shot dead by two gang members. Totally random. When they are caught, it turns out that they are young men that Boyle knows. "Kids I love killing kids I love." It takes a great deal to resist the urge to be angry, judgmental. "Here is what we seek: a compassion that can stand in awe at what the poor have to carry rather than stand in judgment at how they carry it." Looney is fifteen and just out of prison. He's come in to proudly share his report card with G. "All A's!" G looks at it: two C's, two B's, and an A. Close enough! "If you were my son, I'd be the proudest man alive!" he says. Looney weeps. "I just want to have a life."

Boyle recalls the gospel story where friends tear off the roof to let the paralytic into the full house with Jesus. Compassion, he says, is what pulls the roof off for us to let the outsiders in. "The highest form of sanctity is to live in hell and not lose hope." And "resilience is born by grounding yourself in your own loveliness, hitting notes you thought were way out of your range."

G got Jason a job. Homeboy Industries sees a job as the ticket out of the grip of the gangs and into self esteem. Jason bought a new dress for his infant daughter to wear to her baptism. He was very proud of her – and himself. But he was shot dead that week and buried the day of her baptism. It just keeps happening.

But hope endures.

"God created us because he thought we'd enjoy it."

"We try to find a way, then, to hold our fingertips gently to the pulse of God. We watch as our hearts begin to beat as one with the One who delights in our being. Then what do we do? We exhale that same spirit of delight into the world and hope for poetry."

Success and outcomes are bad measures for what Boyle does. He sees God's expectation as just being with the excluded. Stand with them. See it through. Be there. Good for those who work to fix the systems that created the suffering. But Boyle thinks the gospels call us to just be there. That's what Jesus did.

Often the hurt wins. Or seems to. God works very slowly.

Shady is a new mother. Jennifer is one. Her father was shot to death three months ago. Shady asks G about a dream she had that included a child's casket and a dove. That night, she is sitting in the back seat of a crowded car. A stray bullet enters the car and kills her.

Sometimes there is a happy story. Bandit had been given a warehouse job fifteen years ago. Now he has a management position, a wife, three kids, and a home. He comes to see G to announce that his oldest daughter is going to college!

The book ends with the story of sixteen year old Chico. He'd like a job in computers where he can learn. Boyle sets it up. Chico is thrilled, learning, feeling good about himself. Then one night Chico's mom calls. He's been shot from the back seat of a car moving slowly past their house. After the burial, Boyle finds a remote tree in the cemetery and weeps his heart out. It is all too much. This was his 168<sup>th</sup> funeral!

The book is difficult to read. The sadness escalates and escalates. But it is so compelling, you can't put it down. If you want to read a "Looking for Jesus" book, this is it.