

Sunday, August 18, 2019

First Presbyterian Church of Redlands

The First Reading is Psalm 119:97-104

- ⁹⁷ Oh, how I love your law!
It is my meditation all day long.
- ⁹⁸ Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,
for it is always with me.
- ⁹⁹ I have more understanding than all my teachers,
for your decrees are my meditation.
- ¹⁰⁰ I understand more than the aged,
for I keep your precepts.
- ¹⁰¹ I hold back my feet from every evil way,
in order to keep your word.
- ¹⁰² I do not turn away from your ordinances,
for you have taught me.
- ¹⁰³ How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!
- ¹⁰⁴ Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way.

The Second Reading is Matthew 13:24-30

²⁴ Jesus put before them another parable: “The **kingdom of heaven** may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵ but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷ And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ ²⁸ He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ ²⁹ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

The Message is entitled *Wheat, Weeds or Both?*

“The **kingdom of heaven** may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field.” I have known of Father Gregory Boyle, the founder of Homeboy Industries for a long time, but I had never read his bestseller, *Tattoos on the Heart*, until this past week. I was inspired to get a copy of his book and put it on my reading stack, after having the privilege of hearing him speak at the pastor’s breakfast at Loma Linda Medical Center last year. I enjoyed how he opened his remarks to a room filled with pastors last year, for he said, “Why is it that pastors have to have their gatherings so crazy early in the morning for breakfast? The breakfast started at 7:00 A.M., which meant he had to get up quite early to traverse from LA to Loma Linda in time for the breakfast. His next words were, “Why can’t pastors gather for a leisurely lunch or better yet a cocktail hour!” Of course, the room roared with laughter.

The tenor of the room changed though, as he started to share stories from his ministry in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles. He became the pastor of Dolores Mission Church, the poorest parish in the Los Angeles archdiocese in 1986. He touched us all and convicted us deeply. As of 2019, in the language of this parable, Father Gregory has worked in a field of wheat choked by weeds for almost 35 years. Yet thankfully G, as many affectionately call him, knew the wisdom of this parable: "Let both of them, wheat and weeds, grow together until harvest."

The subtitle of Father Boyle's book speaks volume as to his ministry with members of the various gangs that inhabit the neighborhoods surrounding Dolores Mission Church. The subtitle is this: *The Power of Boundless Compassion*. Or put in other words by G, "Be in the world as God is," for God is compassion. Yes, Jesus said to those listening, "let both of them, the wheat and weeds, grow together until harvest."

Yet, most of us are like the slaves who immediately want to pull up the weeds and discard them. We might even be tempted to treat the fields around us with herbicides to keep weeds from cropping up among us.

As I worked with those without homes in Garden Grove, I often heard from members of other churches in Los Ranchos Presbytery after the Shower Ministry story was told, "The people of my church would never allow a shower ministry on our campus." In the language of this parable, "The weeds just got to go!" And so good church folk pull and keep the weeds out and don't get involved in what I know to be a very messy ministry, like the very messy fields of Boyle Heights.

Yet, G didn't pull or keep out the weeds. He walked or rode his bike through the fields where wheat and weeds grew together. His focus though was on nurturing the wheat, the good seed he saw in everyone. Listen to one of G's story:

"I met Anthony through legendary Eastside probation officer Mary Ridgeway. 'Help this kid,' she pleads over the phone. At nineteen years old, Anthony had been on his own for a while. His parents had disappeared long ago in a maelstrom of heroin and prison time, and he was fending for himself, selling the occasional vial of PCP to buy Big Macs. He was a tiny fella, and when he spoke, his voice was puny, reed-thin, and high-pitched. If you closed your eyes, you'd think you were 'conversating' (as the homies say) with a twelve-year-old. One day our conversation was drifting towards, 'what do you want to be when you grow up.' Anthony says, 'I want to be a mechanic. Don't know nothing about cars really. But I'd like to learn.' My mechanic, Dennis, was something of a legend in the barrio. Dennis could fix anything... so I pled my case to Dennis. Hire Anthony as your assistant. Dennis just stares at me [that day]. Long drags of silence and a stony stare... [but] Dennis [finally] looks at me, and this is the only thing he says to me that day: I will teach him everything I know... Anthony becomes a mechanic. He would give me periodic updates. One day Anthony hands me a photograph. There is Anthony, with a broad smile, face smudged with axle grease, work shirt with ANTHONY embroidered proudly on his chest. No question, to look at this face is to know that its owner, Anthony, is a transformed man. But standing next to him in the picture, with an arm around Anthony is Dennis, an equally changed human being. All because Dennis, one day, allowed the wheat and the weed to grow together or as G says, 'Dennis decided to be in the world who God is.'"

“Let both of them, the wheat and weeds, grow together until harvest.”

Isn't this the field where we all live? Where wheat and weed reside together. Where those with good intentions are sometimes blindsided by those who are not. Where some have good intentions, even if they go awry at times. Where some are bent on evil intentions. We live in the field where good and evil cohabit. And this is exactly where God wants us.

The problem with this field is that we are much better at identifying the *weediness* of others. I know I created a word, but forgive me, for we all too easily classify ourselves as the wheat, you know the good stuff. The good ones that love God's precepts. The good ones who do not turn away from God's ordinances. As a matter of fact, we are so good at being wheat that we can design our systems and structures to keep weeds out. It is as if we use herbicides that kill any weeds that come close. Like those cartoon bug commercials, the weeds pack up and head elsewhere.

What if Dennis had decided to keep Anthony out? What if Dennis didn't heed the parable's charge, "Allow the weeds and the wheat to grow together?" Where would Anthony be today? Would anyone else have given him a chance? Would he be a mechanic? Would he be a responsible husband and dad, a man with a career and a purpose? Or would he would have been incarcerated again or just one of the hundreds of funerals G has done over the years?

This parable of the wheat and weeds, along with my reading of *Tattoos of the Heart*, brings to mind other stories of Jesus for me as well. Like taking the log out of our own eyes, before we take the speck out of the eyes of the other. When we think "*weediness*" is only a characteristic of others, self-righteousness has a tendency to set in. "I am wiser, I have more understanding, I just know more," says the psalmist. Self-righteousness leads us to separate the weeds from the wheat long before the harvest.

That is why I appreciate G's ability to voice his own *weediness*. G doesn't claim that he is better than the homies he helps, for he sees that he is often near the precipice of anger or rage with his homies. He knows himself to be part weed and wheat, so his ministry focuses on calling forth the wheat in everyone.

Listen to this story about ten-year-old Lula. He came bounding into G's office one day while he was in the midst of a meeting. Lula was frantically waving something, so G interrupted his meeting and motioned Lula to come in. Lula couldn't wait to show him his report card. Now Lula struggled in school, so G anticipated only a bit of good news. When G opened the report card there was only a string of F's. Here is what G wrote next, "I am frantically pursuing every inch of this report card to find something, anything, for which to praise Lula. I find it. Absences: 0." I say, "Lula, nice going, *mijo*, you didn't miss a day!"

It would have been so easy to focus on the weeds, the string of F's, because that is how most of us are conditioned. Yet, G frantically looked for something, anything, for which to praise Lula.

What if we looked for something, anything, for which to praise others, especially the weedy ones? "Be in the world as God is," writes G. And for G this means boundless compassion, a willingness to "suffer with," to come along side as an equal and frantically search for something, anything that is good.

The truth is, we are all part weed and part wheat, and wholly reliant on God's grace. It is by grace alone that we are able to be compassionate towards others and even to ourselves, for sometimes we probably struggle to recognize our own goodness, our own *wheatness*. Even in

ourselves it is easier to focus on our *weediness* like so many homies that G worked with. And so listen to the advice that G gives to the homies, “Recognizing that we are wholly acceptable is God’s own truth for us – waiting to be discovered.”

God loves us – in all our *weediness* and *wheatness* – by grace alone. “I do not at all understand the mystery of grace,” says Anne Lamott and we might not either. But, Anne Lamott reminds us that “[grace] meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us.”

God’s grace met Anthony’s dream for a future and Dennis was God’s instrument of grace that did not leave Anthony where he was found. Who are the people who have been God’s instruments of grace in your life? How have you been God’s instrument of grace in the lives of others?

Our texts and this sermon are not suggesting that we all become a Father Gregory Boyle. His story is compelling as well as convicting, but his counsel would simply be to each of us, “Be in the world as God is.”

“Be in the world as God is,” for that is the kingdom of heaven on earth. Know yourself to be wholly loved, even though you are part wheat and part weed. Then go into the world bringing a bit of heaven on earth and wholly love others frantically searching for something, anything, for which to offer praise. Amen.

Reference:

Boyle, Gregory. *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*. Free Press: NY. 2010.