

Radical Kinship
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CALL TO WORSHIP

Today is the first day of Hanukkah, Known as the Festival of Lights. Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem during the second century B.C. The event occurred when Jews rose up against Greek-Syrian rulers in the Maccabean Revolt and drove them out of Jerusalem.

To mark their victory, Jews wanted to reclaim the temple and light its menorah, but only found enough pure olive oil for one day. That one-day supply lasted eight and is considered a miracle in Jewish faith. So even though the candles are usually lit at sun-down, we light one this morning, in honor of our Jewish friends and neighbors.

READING

Friends, I have never in my entire career as a preacher, had such a hard time picking readings out of a book to share with you. The problem is that every page of this book, “Barking to the Choir” by Jesuit priest Gregory Boyle, is worthy of a reading. Boyle also wrote an amazing first book called “Tattoos on the Heart.” Both books are about his encounters with the holy and with radical kinship, in his work as founder and director of Homebody Industries, the largest gang-intervention program in the world, that is located right here in Los Angeles. I consider both books sacred texts, that, similar to how one might read their favorite books in the Bible, you can pick up and start reading anywhere in the book, to get a dose of reflection and inspiration that can pull you out of your self-absorbed inner dialogue and worries, and make you think and act in the world in a different way.

I came to realize that I could either choose readings that feature heart-breaking stories about former gang members’ terrible ordeals as children, being abused beyond our comprehension, or simply abandoned, stories that describe their unfathomable dearth of self-worth, their journeys of being jumped into a gang, then incredibly, finding their way out to a better life, OR, readings that are more sermonizing in nature from the gospel of Father Boyle, that speak of a radical theology that can truly save us from our own isolating tendencies to judge, or to follow a God whose vision of kinship is too small.

I’m going to offer you a little of both, they’re a little long, but the sermon will be shorter. So here’s the first part, which begins with theology.

(pp 164 – 165)

There are two hundred references in Scripture that ask us to take special care of the poor. I’m guessing, then, it’s important. It is this preferential care and love for the poor that sets the stage for the “original program” [The original program that is about living the gospel with joy and always being mindful of the poor]. It doesn’t draw lines – it erases them. It rises above the polarizing temperature of our times. It doesn’t shake its finger at anybody but instead helps us all put our finger on it. We could ask ourselves, I suppose, if God is conservative or liberal, but I

think that's the wrong question. Instead we should ask: Is God expansive or tiny? Is God spacious or shallow? Is God inclusive or exclusive? What are the chances that God holds the same tiny point of view as I do? Well, zero . . .

The original covenantal relationship in the Hebrew Bible went like this: "As I have loved you, so must you have a special, preferential, favored love for the widow, orphan, and stranger." God knows that these folks know what it's like to be cut off. And because they know this particular suffering, God finds them trustworthy to lead and guide the rest of us to the birth of a new inclusion, to the exquisite mutuality of kinship: God's dream come true . . .

(pp 195 – 196)

I recall being interviewed on the Christian Broadcasting Network by a woman who, having just listened to my litany of things we do at Homeboy Industries, from tattoo removal to job training, case management to mental health counseling, paused cautiously once I had finished. "But how much time do you spend at Homebody Industries each day, you know, praising God?" she asked.

I actually didn't know what to say to that, but found myself offering: "All damn day."

How does praise please God, anyway? What kind of praise does God have any interest in? Does exaltation matter to our "exhausted" God?

I received an award once at a gala dinner. I was the second to be recognized, and the woman before me was breathless and seemed hugely panicked while giving her acceptance speech. "First, I have to thank Jesus Christ," she began, "because, after all, without him I am nothing." And all I'm thinking is: hostage video. I'm imagining Jesus offstage, behind the curtain, holding this woman's dog with a pistol to ol' Fido's temple.

"That's right," Jesus says, and nods. "Damn right, ya better thank me."

I already knew that in my speech I wouldn't be thanking Jesus. This is not because he is less important to me or my life. But I know, with all the certainty of my being, that Jesus has no interest in my doing this. To just say, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, I'm your biggest fan," causes him to stare at his watch, tap his feet, and order a double Glenlivet on the rocks with a twist. Fandom is of no interest to Jesus. What matters to him is the authentic following of a disciple. We all settle for saying, "Jesus," but Jesus wants us to be in the world who he is.

PRAYER # 490 Wild Geese

READING pp 202 -205

SERMON

We have just begun the season of Advent, one of my favorite times of year. These are the weeks that lead up to the coming of Jesus; Advent, when we break it down in the Latin, means toward

the coming. For religious liberals such as ourselves who may be ambivalent about Jesus, you can think of it as a time ripe for spiritual and emotional growth. It's when we can pay more attention to the holy that is all around us, if only we have eyes to see, and ears to hear, senses attuned. These are choices we make – they don't just happen to us. The miracle of the season *is* that we have the choice, and that we make it.

Rather than dull our senses with the usual suspects, like television, drinking or shopping, we might say, this year it's not going to be about things, or parties, or binge-watching TV to get through the long nights. Traditionally and metaphorically, Christians are told to “stay awake, don't go to sleep.” Meaning, snap out of the rat-race slumber you've endured all year, snap out of the coping mechanisms, and the pathology of taking our lives for granted. This is the last month of the year, our last chance to learn something wonderful about the nature of life in 2018.

To inspire you this Advent, a perfect text to pick up is “Barking to the Choir” by Father Gregory Boyle of Homebody Industries. The theme of this book is “the power of radical kinship,” and it's a theme we'll be exploring these first three Sundays of December. Today we begin by understanding what radical kinship is, as Gregory Boyle describes it. Next week, we'll talk about what it might look like for us, as a church community, in some work we can do with the poor and the homeless. Finally, we'll talk about radical kinship among our own families and friends, in a sermon I've optimistically titled, “Surviving Christmas.”

Now, because my readings were long, I promised my message would be short, so let's get to it: what are the essential components of radical kinship? It's about calling out the illusion of our separateness, whether that's between Democrats and Republicans, the rich and the poor, men and women, gay and straight, you get the idea. We are all of one family, the human family, no matter what, or what we've done.

As Father Boyle points out, virtually all gang members are orphans: abused, abandoned, forsaken. They valued their lives so little they didn't care if they ended up in prison or dead. We cannot judge them, for the story of their lives is much more complicated than that. They deserve a second chance, just as we all do. Like everyone, they deserve to know the love of community, and belonging.

But to do so, in today's world, *and* in the world that Jesus inhabited, was and is considered radical. And so we must pair it with this primordial word, “kinship.” When the world of humans began, that was all that mattered, actual blood ties, and it eventually gave rise to ritual and religion. But the world is old, and we've evolved to a time and place where we must expand that definition, and widen our vision of what kinship means. It means all our relations, and well beyond the human family, to include all earth's life and inhabitants. Truly, we know, our survival depends on it. But the first step of this real-life salvation, is to acknowledge, embody, and *live* this radical kinship with other humans – we must see that even the most unlikely one belongs to us, and we belong to him or her.

And it brings me to a favorite line from Father Boyle's book, and a concept I'll repeat next week. “Jesus wants us to be in the world who he is.” Radical kinship is not an idea we can nod our heads at, and think, oh that's fabulous Rev. Hannah, that makes me feel GOOD and RIGHTEOUS. No, no, no! It's not about feeling or thinking. We need *to go* to the margins of society, not so we can help, fix, or SAVE anybody, but so we can be changed BY THEM.

“Blessed are the least of these, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” These aren’t pious niceties Jesus uttered, this is an *instruction*. We must have favored love for the widow, orphan, and stranger because they can teach us more than anyone what holy, radical kinship is. Go there, and you shall find! I will talk about one way you can go there next week.

Now, in my last reading, which incidentally, is the very end of the book (pp 202 – 205), when Father Boyle’s alma mater is applauding a standing ovation for the sobbing Mario, the ex-gang member who is very tattooed, and catching a glimpse of his true worth, there are two lines I want to hold up there, too. The first is, “a roomful of strangers returned him to himself.” *Returned him to himself*. Don’t we all wish, when we are feeling lost, to be returned to ourselves? Isn’t that the apex of healing, and peace, and well-being? But we find – I find – I can’t do it by myself! I need other members of the human family, to help me do that. And we’re all the same, we *all* need that beloved community, be it strangers or loved ones, from time to time, to bring us back to ourselves.

That is the kind of holy embodiment we can reflect on, and act on, during the season of Advent, and ideally, it changes us so powerfully, that we find ways to act on this year-round. To the point that not only do *we* heal, but we’re able to help others heal, too.

The second line is “befriending his own wound.” One reason young people join gangs is to distract themselves from their wounds, personal wounds of growing up unloved and neglected, or worse. It’s easier to focus on hating the rival gang, than looking at your own pain. The thing is, we all do this, don’t we? We become fixated on how so-and-so is pissing us off or wronging us, to avoid the harder feelings of disappointment, abandonment, or despair. Man, there’s nothing like the holidays to make you think about what’s gone wrong in your life. But this is another opportunity Advent offers to us. We can do the hard but necessary work of “befriending our wounds.” It’s a way of integrating our hurts, so they don’t hurt us. It’s about loving our story, because it’s our story, and our wounds are like characters in the story – they, too, are worthy of being in radical kinship with us. Rather than terrorize us with rage, we must, must befriend them.

Father Boyle writes (p. 116), “At Homeboy Industries, we don’t teach homies *not to be* angry but *how to be* angry. To move forward, homies must make a choice to no longer be a victim of their own anger. They befriend their wound to keep them from despising their woundedness.” And then he quotes Thich Nhat Hanh, the Buddhist Bodhisattva, “‘Keep your loneliness warm,’ . . . Our brokenness is meant to be kept close.”

I love that line, and it’s a line worth meditating on, praying on. “Our brokenness is meant to be kept close.” Like Jesus and his parables, it turns some of our prized assumptions on their head. It doesn’t mean that we’re not to be joyful, it’s quite the opposite. It means we are joyful, because we’re not spending all our energy trying to keep our losses and pains at an arm’s length, sometimes at a mile’s length. No, when we surrender to the fact that our wounds are part of our hearts, we acknowledge they’ve been there all along, and then we can love ourselves better because they’re a sacred part of who we are. And who we are, like everyone else, is a beloved child of God.

Look, I don’t care if you believe in God or not. The point is, we all suffer, we all have wounds, it’s part of our lot as humans, it’s part of what brings us in kinship to everyone else. And we are

all God to one another, when we embody that sense of radical kinship, loving one another, and returning each other to ourselves.

So. Happy start of Advent! You have 24 days left, including today, to chew on all this, and make the most of it. I'm making the choice to be more alert, and watchful, and "stay awake," until Christmas, and I hope you will, too. The choice is yours, to ask, how can I keep from singing?