

“Illuminating Identity: Plain and Simple”

*A sermon preached on Luke 6:17-26 by Emily Hull McGee
on February 17, 2019 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

If you were to visit Los Angeles wanting to take in some local culture, the smattering of options would be, of course, as rich and full as one might imagine when visiting one of the largest and most notorious of our American cities. The showbiz, the Silicon Valley giants, the beautiful people on the sandy beaches. Among all that glitters, one might overlook the grit of the streets and the margins.

But if you were to visit Los Angeles wanting to see a bit of that side, you might want to take in an afternoon at the Homeboy Diner at LA’s City Hall, or pick up a plate of fish tacos at Homegirl Cafe, or even pass on your old iPhone with Homeboy Electronics Recycling. You might be taken aback in these places, as your servers and specialists would likely be covered in tattoos and piercings that would make you wince. They’d have a certain way about them.

For you see, the men and women of Homeboy Industries are former gang members, most of which were once (or twice or dozens of times) incarcerated.¹ But more than 30 years ago, when Father Greg Boyle became the pastor of Delores Mission Church, he who is older, kindly, balding, and white couldn’t have imagined that one day, he’d be director of a global movement of hope, training, and support — the largest gang-intervention,

¹ Truly remarkable story of redemption and new life found all over Homeboy Industries. Read more about their work on their website: <http://homeboyindustries.org/> ; Father Greg Boyle has now written two books bearing witness to what he’s seen and heard through Homeboy Industries: *Tattoos on the Heart*, and *Barking to the Choir*.

rehabilitation, and reentry program in the world — and would watch more than 10,000 former gang members around L.A. pass over the landscape ———
What would prompt such a life?

Father Boyle tells a story about as people of faith, we ought to be imitating the kind of God we believe in — the God of spaciousness love for humankind — and calling people back to the truth of who they are: “that they’re exactly what God had in mind when God made them.” For when we are attentive to God in belief and action, Father Boyle says, we return people to themselves. And in the process, you’re returned to yourself.

“I have a homie named Louie,” Father Boyle says, slipping into the affectionate kinship language he uses for the men and women of Homeboy Industries. “Louie just turned 18, and he’s kind of a difficult kid... exasperating, whiny. And he works for me, although “work” may be too strong a verb.

But homies lately have asked me for blessings, which is odd. It’s in the last three years. They never — they always ask me on the street or in my office, and they never say, “Father, may I have your blessing?” They always say, “Hey, G, give me a bless, yeah?”

And they always say it the same way. So this kid, Louie, I’m talking to him, and he’s complaining about something. And finally, at the end of it, he says, “Hey, G, give me a bless, yeah?” I said, “Sure.” So he comes around to my side of the desk, and he knows the drill, and he bows his head, and I put my hands on his shoulder.

Well, his birthday had been two days before, so it gave me an opportunity to say something to him. And I said, “You know, Louie, I’m proud

to know you, and my life is richer because you came into it. When you were born, the world became a better place. And I'm proud to call you my son, even though" – and I don't know why I decided to add this part – "at times, you can really be a huge pain in the neck."

And he looks up, and he smiles. And he says, "The feeling's mutual."

And suddenly, kinship, so quickly. It's not – you're not, sort of, this delivery system. But – maybe I return him to himself. But there is no doubt that he's returned me to myself."²

For in the landscape of God's kingdom of God – where last is first and first is last, where poor are favored and rich are humbled, where mountains are lowered and valleys are raised – it is through Jesus, the Great Equalizer, Emmanuel, God-**with**-us, that we return, plain and simple, to God, to ourselves, and to each other.

II.

Of all the gospel writers, Luke understands this type of return best. You remember how from even the earliest chapters where he narrates the coming of Jesus, Luke has a powerful bent towards leveling, equalizing, making the way to God in Christ accessible to Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slave and free, poor and rich. We heard it in Mary's song of praise – bringing down the powerful and lifting up the lowly. We saw it in the announcement of the greatest news that came to a crew of dirty shepherds working the night shift in the middle of nowhere. We imagined it as John the Baptist painted a picture of the One to come where valleys are filled and

² Story shared between Krista Tippett and Father Greg Boyle on the *On Being* podcast, originally aired 2/26/13 and shared again on 11/22/17. A transcript can be found here: <https://onbeing.org/programs/greg-boyle-the-calling-of-delight-gangs-service-and-kinship-nov2017/>

mountains are made low. We felt it in Jesus's first sermon to the hometown crowd in Nazareth, proclaiming release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and jubilee to all who are crushed in debt. And it strained our backs last week, as Simon and James and John felt scarcity then abundance in their nets, laying them down to follow their Lord. Last, first; first, last; this upside down kingdom of God.

That's the context we must understand when we turn to today's gospel passage, where Jesus, having now a measure of fame and reach in the region, comes to the crowds to teach and restore. Luke says they came from all over, from Judea and Jerusalem, centers of Jewish life, and from Tyre and Sidon, lands filled with Gentiles and all sorts of others. From here and there and everywhere, the people were nearly as hungry for hope and healing as they were for sustenance of their daily bread. The crowds were surely filled with the have and the have nots, the sick and the well, the disciples and the doubters.

And to them all, Jesus "came down with them," Luke said, "and stood on a level place." He came down **with** them, and stood on a level place! For no matter your knowledge of scripture, Luke intended for this geographical detail to register for his readers. For the words that followed would echo throughout time and sound a great deal like what we call the Beatitudes from the Gospel of Matthew. There as is here, these words of blessing began a stretch of scripture commonly called Jesus's sermon. In Matthew, we call it the "Sermon on the Mount." But here in Luke, we call it the "Sermon on the Plain."

Matthew, of course, was a writer keen to connect the dots between Jesus and Moses, making clear to the descendants of the Israelites that Jesus of Nazareth was their long-promised Messiah. So it's no accident he positioned Jesus high atop a mountain — elevated in nature and by nature from the crowds he came to save. But Luke's Jesus is the Great Equalizer, you remember, the one who came down from the mountain to stand with his people on the level place — looking them in the eyes, putting his hands on their shoulders, attending to their physical and spiritual needs, speaking plainly on the plain to deliver good news that changes everything.

What follows then should be no surprise from the Holy Leveler. “Blessed are the poor, blessed are the hungry, blessed are the weeping, blessed are the hated.” For each of these groups of people who would never receive such kindness and attention, Jesus called them blessed, or put another way — ‘honored are you,’ or ‘favored are those.’

That sentiment is a far cry from how we throw such words around these days. Our young adult Sunday School class this morning talked about the way the word ‘blessed’ (or, as it's found on Instagram, #blessed) has traveled far from such a context. Rather, when attached to a picture of one in an exotic locale and a caption like “So excited to be teaching yoga in the Caribbean! #blessed” or with a wry pic from the grocery and a caption “Strawberries are half off at Trader Joe's! #blessed,” it seems we've wandered into humble-brag, just-getting-lucky, look-at-how-awesome-my-life-is territory.³ For in the upside down kingdom of God, blessed are those living in

³ For a great read on the ubiquity of #blessed in modern popular culture, check out this *New York Times* read called “They Feel ‘Blessed,’” by Jessica Bennett here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/fashion/blessed-becomes-popular-word-hashtag-social-media.html>

the slums on the edges of paradise, their lives barely sustained by tourist dollars who revel in the beaches of their home. In the mountains-lowered, valleys-lifted kingdom of God, blessed are the migrant strawberry farmers, the ones working the assembly line and the drivers and the stockers and the cashiers who get food from farm to your table.

Father Greg Boyle — remember him? — likes to say that the Beatitudes' original language was not 'blessed are' or 'happy are'...but that the most precise translation is 'You're in the right place if.' "You're in the right place if." "I like that better," he says. "For it turns out the Beatitudes is not a spirituality. It's a geography. It tells you where to stand."⁴

Jesus knew that and spoke it plainly from that plain to this one. You're in the right place, you're favored and honored, I see you when you're poor or hungry or weeping or reviled. I look you in the eye, I call you by name, I meet you where you are, I come with and to you to set you free.

And what about those woes, the ones we sometimes gloss right past? Woe to you who are rich or full or laughing or well thought of by others. There's no question that Luke's Jesus is intimately concerned with those who lack the physical necessities of this world, and we should not for a moment overlook that. But I wonder if also the good news of this passage to those who find themselves among the blessed, honored, or favored, or if you more readily see yourselves with the warned, is that in all things, in all places, Jesus situates himself **with** us all and meets us where we are. For as one writer

⁴ <https://onbeing.org/programs/greg-boyle-the-calling-of-delight-gangs-service-and-kinship-nov2017/>

says, "the beatitudes do not tell us what to do. They tell us who we are, and more importantly, they tell us who Jesus is."⁵

III.

So if in this upside kingdom of God, you find yourself on the back of bus or the front, the bottom of the ferris wheel or the top, the last or the first, no matter where you are in the landscape of things, might we find assurance that the God who meets us where we are, who names and claims us is the God in Jesus who levels our hills and makes straight our paths, whose good news for poor and rich, hungry and filled, weeping and laughing, reviled or revered, because Jesus said this: for I am with you always, and this kingdom this new day that is dawning even in this moment is one where even the last and the least can bear Christ in this world.

For in the One whose very life was blessed and broken for the world, we are found and returned — to ourselves, to each other, and to God. Friends, this is good news indeed! Amen.

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, "God's Ferris Wheel," *Home By Another Way*, p56.