

He was a soulful guy - a gang member, like his Father, who died of an overdose. The drugs kept you numb, kept the pain at bay. Joseph himself had had a lot of overdoses, had gotten close but hadn't died, and somehow by God's grace had found his way to Homeboy. One day he wandered into G's office and said, "You know what I think life is? Life is just removing the blindfold." G nodded his head, said, "yeah, you're probably right. But what do you see when the blindfold falls?"

Joseph paused, the moments of his life fast forwarding through his head, and then he put his hand right here (on his chest) and said, "Goodness."

Last weekend, I attended a retreat with Fr. Greg Boyle, SJ, founder of Homeboy Industries which is the largest gang rehabilitation and re-entry program in the world. In one of our sessions he shared how he had spoken at the Los Angeles Festival of Books a few years back. Sitting on a panel with a Rabbi, they each told stories of hope

and restoration. And then, he shared with the audience the two principles which guide the work and life of Homeboy Industries:

The first: Everybody is unshakably good. No exceptions.

And the second: We belong to each other. No exceptions.

And then somewhat rhetorically, he said, "Now, do I think that every single vexing or complex social dilemma we face would in fact disappear if we embraced these two principles? Then he paused, and said definitively, "Yes, I do." And the whole room erupted in laughter, startling him. When the laughter subsided, he gazed across the room and said again, "Yes, I do. And, I think in fact the reason we struggle to make progress in the world is because we don't believe these two things, much less embrace them."

As I processed what he had said, I was intrigued and confronted. While the principles sounded

powerfully hopeful and inclusive, something in me resisted. The words “everybody” and “no exception”, were radical, absolute, and seemed impossible. As I sat with and pondered the tenants throughout the day, I found myself drawn in by the possibility and hope to which they pointed. I wondered: did I believe them - that every person is truly good, and that we belong to each other - without exception? I tried to imagine how my life & relationships, our community and the world might be transformed if only we embodied these words. And I sensed God speaking into my heart, inviting me to risk trying on love which insists, demands, that I acknowledge God's goodness in all people, and that it arises out of our connectedness to one another. Goodness and Belonging, no exceptions.

In today's lesson from Matthew, Jesus is gathered with his disciples one last time before he will venture toward Jerusalem and the cross. He's told them of his arrest, crucifixion, death and

resurrection to come, and he's spoken of the day when he will return in glory. They want to know more — what exactly are they to do? How are they to prepare? Jesus tries to describe it in a way they can understand: people separated like sheep and goats; warnings of eternal punishment and promises of eternal life. But beyond the apocalyptic images and sense of holy judgment that permeates his words, Jesus speaks into their 'present' moment — and tells them how they, his followers are to go on, how they are to be people who bear inclusive, unconditional love and mercy into the world. They are to look beyond the labels and barriers of society into the faces of those often cast out, seeing in them not brokenness, but God's goodness. And then, they are to call them into community, to care for them, because they belong to Christ, and we belong to each other.

Yes, the end times will come but rather than worry themselves about it Jesus speaks of radical, transformative love, love that sees Christ in all people. It is a powerful love, one that restores

wholeness and belonging—to the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, sick and imprisoned— It is love that the world needs now, not someday. Because such love tears down walls of exclusion and builds people up. And this is the love to which we, disciples of Jesus, are called. Each of us, in our own spaces and places are to take the goodness of God that dwells within us, and employ it to the service and for the good of our neighbor, so that the good in them might be revealed and owned. Because when we do this for them, we likewise do it for Him.

The Sufi mystic Rumi wrote: **God's religion is love, and love is how we practice it.**

It's God's delight in us and God's love for us that make our loving actions possible. As God spoke to Jesus, so too hear God saying to us: "You are my beloved, in you I am wonderfully pleased. Or in the words of a Homey (what they call gang members at Homeboy), "You are beloved, I think you're perfect!" Are there more powerful words

ever spoken but these of the God of all to God's beloved? God knows the goodness that dwells within us, for God has planted it there. It is this goodness that informs who we are and how we engage the world. We each are called to practice love through acts of love, mercy, compassion and generosity—to bear Christ's restorative love into the world; a love that has the power to heal and make whole.

Perhaps one way to embrace and respond to Christ's call to love and serve all of God's people as Jesus did, is to begin by trying on this mantra: **Everyone is unshakably good, no exception.** If we can believe it about others, we just might believe it about ourselves too.

Sure, it might push against our protective sensibilities, or make us feel like vulnerable fools for Jesus, but God assures us that beyond our fear and discomfort lies belonging and welcome for us, and for all. When we *choose* to see and acknowledge the good not only in ourselves, but in every person we encounter, without exception,

the barriers that divide us are surrendered and a new pathway toward wholeness is forged.

You see, we belong to each other. No exception. This is what the kingdom of God, right here on earth, is all about. Jesus invites us to come back to the truth of who we are, who we have been created to be: Good; beloved; delightful. The common ground upon which God calls us to stand demands that we see the God-given goodness in one another, and to find in this shared truth a realm of belonging to one another that insists on love, service, compassion and care for one another. What are the implications? When we belong to one another - no one is left behind; no one is excluded, resources are shared and needs are met. Love flourishes, wounds are healed, people are made whole.

In a weary, broken world, our pathway forward depends upon seeing one another as inherently and absolutely good, and by acknowledging the

necessity and gift of our shared common life.
When we belong to one another,

Breathe in the Spirit that delights in you, so you can breathe it out into the world and make God's dream of belonging, peace and love come true. When we own and acknowledge our goodness, we enter the quiet immensity of our own presence and discover that we are, in fact, a divine presence. God is not outside, but is the breath within our breath.