

**Greg Boyle** is founder and executive director of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles. His books include *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* and, more recently, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*.

### Transcript

**Krista Tippett, host:** Father Greg Boyle makes amazingly winsome connections between things like service and delight, and compassion and awe — amazing, because he works in an urban setting others describe in terms of crime and despair. He landed as an idealistic young Jesuit in a gang-heavy neighborhood of Los Angeles three decades ago. Now he heads Homeboy Industries, which employs former gang members in a constellation of businesses from screen printing to a farmers market to a bakery. An op-ed in The Los Angeles Times said of Homeboy Industries, “How much bleaker and meaner would L.A. be without it?” Fr. Greg says service is not an end in itself, but a beginning towards finding real kinship with others. That’s in this story he tells, for example, about giving a blessing to a kid named Louie.

[music: “Seven League Boots” by Zoë Keating]

**Greg Boyle:** 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 ass.”

[laughter]

And he looks up, and he smiles. And he says, “The feeling’s mutual.”

[laughter]

And suddenly, kinship, so quickly. You’re not this delivery system. Maybe I return him to himself. But there is no doubt that he’s returned me to myself.

**Ms. Tippett:** I’m Krista Tippett, and this is *On Being*.

[music: “Seven League Boots” by Zoë Keating]

**Ms. Tippett:** Fr. Greg Boyle first became known to a wide audience in the 1990s, when a book was written about him called *G-Dog and the Homeboys*. In 2010, he wrote his own very moving memoir, *Tattoos on the Heart*, and more recently, penned a terrific follow-up, *Barking to the Choir*. In addition to Homeboy Industries, Fr. Greg’s work with

young men and women also includes free services like GED classes, life counseling, and tattoo removal. I interviewed Greg Boyle at the outdoor Hall of Philosophy at the Chautauqua Institution in the summer of 2012.

*[applause]*

**Ms. Tippett:** I want us to talk, obviously, about what you do, but really focus in on the “why” of it and on what these experiences have worked in you, and how they’ve formed your sense of who God is and what it means to be human. But first of all, tell us how you came to your call to be a Jesuit.

**Fr. Boyle:** First of all, it’s so great to be here, and I’m so honored to be in a conversation with you. I’m a big fan, though I do have a recurring nightmare that I’m interviewed by Krista Tippett, and I’m found shallow and lacking faith.

*[laughter]*

This is way better than the actual nightmare I have.

*[laughter]*

Well, I was educated by Jesuits, so for me, they were always this combo burger of absolute hilarity and joy, and the most fun people to be around. And they were prophetic. This was during the time of the Vietnam War, so we’d laugh a lot, and I’d go with them to protesting the war. The combination of the prophetic and the hilarious — I loved that. So I thought, boy, I’ll have what they’re having, you know? So that’s what I did. It’s not very deep, but that’s kind of — the reasons you join an organization like the Society of Jesus aren’t the reasons you stay. But that kind of was my initial hook.

**Ms. Tippett:** Right. Why did you stay? Tell me that.

**Fr. Boyle:** *[laughs]* I got a feeling you might ask that. Again, it’s — “la Compañía de Jesús” is what St. Ignatius called the thing, so it’s about being in companionship with Jesus. And St. Ignatius, in his spiritual exercises, has a meditation called “The Two Standards.” And in it he says, very simply, “See Jesus standing in the lowly place.” It’s not about saluting a set of beliefs, necessarily; it’s about walking with Jesus and being a companion. And I haven’t found anything that’s brought me more life or joy than standing with Jesus, but also with the particularity of standing in the lowly place with the easily despised and the readily left out, and with the demonized so that the demonizing will stop, and with the disposable so that the day will come when we stop throwing people away. And I find the fullness of life in trying to, as best I can, in my own way, to stand there.

**Ms. Tippett:** So that particular place where the Jesuits took you — in 1986, is that right? — is to the Dolores Mission, which, at that time — I don't know if this is still true — was the poorest parish in the city and had the highest concentration of gang activity in the world, at that time. And there's so much grief and so much heartbreak in these kids' lives and in the stories that you tell. And yet you always come back, again and again, to talking in this way: that spiritually, theologically, this is not so much about helping others — I'm saying that — but that this is fundamentally about our common call to delight in one another. I think that's very unexpected language.

**Fr. Boyle:** Well, Dorothy Day — I think she quotes Ruskin when she always talks about the “duty to delight.” *[Editor's note: Dorothy Day often quoted John Ruskin's phrase “the duty of delight” in her writing. She references the idea in The Long Loneliness, as well as in journal entries. Learn more.]* And I think it's right to see it as a duty, because you have to be absolutely conscious of it. But it's really a delighting that enters into full kinship with each other. I'm greatly privileged in my life to have known Cesar Chavez, who was an extraordinary leader of a movement but was also one of the best listeners I'd ever known. He could just — you were the only person who existed, if you were having a conversation with him. But I remember, once, a reporter had commented to him and said, “Wow, these farm workers, they sure love you.” And Cesar just shrugged and smiled. And he said, “The feeling's mutual.”

*[laughter]*

And that's what you hope for; I'm not the great healer, and that gang member over there is in need of my exquisite healing. The truth is, it's mutual, and that as much as we are called to bridge the distance that exists between us, we have to acknowledge that there's a distance, even in service: a service provider; you're the service recipient. And you want to bridge even that so that you can get to this place of utter mutuality.

And I think that's where the place of delight is: that I've learned everything of value, really, in the last 25 years, from precisely the people who you think are on the receiving end of my gifts and talent and wisdom — but quite the opposite. It's mutual.

**Ms. Tippett:** I always like hearing people tell about the things they did that didn't work out on the way to the things that they know. And it's very interesting — one of the ways you tried to serve when you first arrived there was, you were going to be a peacemaker, right? You were going to make truce between these warring gangs. And you found that, in fact, that — which maybe seemed obvious — wasn't right.

**Fr. Boyle:** Well, a lot of things — anything worth doing is worth failing at, I think, so it seemed sensible to me. And we'd have these Pyrrhic victories of “Let's agree not to

shoot into each other's houses." That seems not much of a victory. Then we'd have ceasefires and truces and peace treaties. And it was a lot of shuttle diplomacy, where I'd actually write up a thing, and one side would sign it, the other side would sign it, and it would work for a time. But if you work with gangs, you provide oxygen to gangs. And that's not a good thing, and I can see that now.

**Ms. Tippett:** One of the realizations you've said you made out of that is that peacemaking requires conflict. And while there's lots of violence between gangs, there's not conflict that you can define, like you can with a war.

**Fr. Boyle:** Yeah, it's difficult, because I'm sort of the dissenting voice, I think, in the country at the moment, when it comes to this thing. And sometimes people will say to you, "Well, how can you be against peacemaking?" Well, obviously, I'm not against peacemaking. But I'm old-fashioned: I think peacemaking requires conflict, and it's important to say that there is no conflict in gang violence. There's violence, but there's no conflict, so it's not about anything.

So you want to understand: What language is gang violence speaking? That's important to me.

It's about a lethal absence of hope. It's about kids who can't imagine a future for themselves. It's about kids who weren't seeking anything when they joined a gang. It's about the fact that they're always fleeing something — always, without exception. So it shifts the way you see things.

Somebody, Bertrand Russell or somebody, said, "If you want to change the world, change the metaphor." And that's kind of how we want to, I think we need to proceed, in something like this. So if you think it's the Middle East, you're quite mistaken. If you think it's Northern Ireland, wrong again. It's about kids who've ceased to care. So you want to infuse young people with hope, when it seems that hope is foreign.

**Ms. Tippett:** And as you tell their stories, it's hard to imagine where they would draw hope from. A lot of them — I don't know, it's not just that many of them have been abandoned or that they come from a single-parent home. The stories that stuck with me were the kid whose father left them on the day of his 6th birthday while they were all waiting to light the candles for his dad to come home; or the one whose mother literally tortured him because he reminded her so much of his terrible father. And there's drugs and violence and incarceration in these kids' families.

What also occurs to me, though — because you know them, you take delight in them, and you love them — I think that also gives you a much more — well, a sense of how

the lines between what it means to be an enemy or a friend or a victim or a survivor — how those things blur in real, messy, human life.

**Fr. Boyle:** Well, lately, I've been reading the Acts of the Apostles really carefully. And if you start to read it and think it's a quaint snapshot of the earliest Christian community, that's one thing. But what if you were to read it as a measure of the health of any community? So you see how they love one another, or there is nobody in need in this community, for example. But my favorite one is — it leapt off the page to me. And it says, "And awe came upon everyone," so that the measure of our compassion lies not in our service of those on the margins, but in our willingness to see ourselves in kinship. And so that means the decided movement towards awe, and giant steps away from judgment.

So how can we seek a compassion that can stand in awe at what people have to carry, rather than stand in judgment at how they carry it? And I think that's sort of the key here. That's the place of health in any community — forget Christian community; in any community, that's how you know that you're healthy.

So recently, I gave a talk, a training, an all-day training to 600 social workers, a training on gangs. I had two homies with me, and one of them was a guy named José. And he got up — he's in his late 20s, and he now works in a substance abuse part of our team, a man in recovery and been a heroin addict and gang member and tattooed. And he gets up, and he says, very offhandedly, "You know, I guess you could say that my mom and me, we didn't get along so good. I guess I was six when she looked at me, and she said, 'Why don't you just kill yourself? You're such a burden to me.'"

Well, the whole audience did what you just did. They gasped. And then he said — "It's sounds way worser in Spanish," he said.

*[laughter]*

And everybody did what you just did. And then he said, "You know, I guess I was nine when my mom drove me down to the deepest part of Baja California, and she walked me up to an orphanage, and she said, 'I found this kid.'" And then he said, "I was there 90 days, until my grandmother could get out of her where she had dumped me, and she came and rescued me."

And then he tells the audience, "My mom beat me every single day. In fact, I had to wear three T-shirts to school every day." And then he kind of loses the battle with his own tears a little bit, and he says, "I wore three T-shirts well into my adult years,

because I was ashamed of my wounds. I didn't want anybody to see them. But now my wounds are my friends. I welcome my wounds. I run my fingers over my wounds."

And then he looks at this crowd, and he says, "How can I help the wounded if I don't welcome my own wounds?" And awe came upon everyone, because we're so inclined to judge this kid who went to prison and is tattooed and is a gang member and homeless and a heroin addict, and the list goes on. But he was never seeking anything when he ended up in those places. He was always fleeing the story I just told you.

[*music: "En Cada Lugar" by Federico Aubele*]

I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *On Being*. Today, in the Hall of Philosophy at the Chautauqua Institution with Fr. Greg Boyle, the founder of one of the largest gang intervention programs in the U.S., Homeboy Industries.

**Ms. Tippett:**Something I think a lot about is how, in this culture, we've overused and watered down some of the words we need the most, that actually mean the most. "Compassion" is one of them. "Love" is another. You talked about this a minute ago. You started talking about compassion. But I'd like to put some more flesh on those bones of those words. And I wonder, if you think about compassion or love, are there people who come to mind or moments that come to mind that really express what these words have come to mean, lived?

**Fr. Boyle:**Well, if you presume that God is compassionate loving-kindness, that all we're asked to do in the world is to be, in the world, who God is, and so you're always trying to ...

**Ms. Tippett:**But that's huge. [*laughs*] That's huge.

**Fr. Boyle:**Yeah, and so you're trying to imitate the kind of God you believe in. You want to move away from whatever is tiny-spirited and judgmental, as I mentioned, but you want to be as spacious as you can be, that you can have room for stuff. And love is all there is, and love is all you are, and you want people to recognize the truth of who they are, that they're exactly what God had in mind when God made them. Alice Miller, who's the late, great child psychologist, talked about we're all called to be enlightened witnesses: people who, through your kindness and tenderness and focused attent of love, return people to themselves. And in the process, you're returned to yourself.

Like I have a homie named Louie, who's just turned 18, and he's kind of a difficult kid. He's exasperating, and he's whiny. And he works for me, although "work" may be too strong a verb.

[laughter]

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?"

[laughter]

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 ass."

[laughter]

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

[laughter]

And suddenly, kinship, so quickly. You're not this delivery system. Maybe I return him to himself. But there is no doubt that he's returned me to myself.

**Ms. Tippett:** You use this word, "spacious," and synonyms for spacious are there all over the place, especially in your memoir when you're talking about God, the spaciousness of God, the vastness of God, the largeness of God. You quote Hafiz: "this Great, Wild God," God's limitless magnanimity.

That's very exciting, really emboldening language. But it's not — I don't think it's a language people would ever reach for themselves, if they were shown the statistics about the part of town you minister in, or pictures. So how do you think about that gap, that disconnect?

**Fr. Boyle:** Well, I'm a Jesuit, so Ignatius always talks about the "God who is always greater," and that is part of the issue, whenever you land on a God who's tiny or judgmental or exacting or concerned with some kind of purity code. It sort of blows it wide open, knowing that there's a need to have this blown wide open all the time.

And I can remember walking in the projects late at night, long ago, and there was this kid, Mario, sitting by himself, 16 years old, just sitting on his little stoop in front of the crummy old projects. So I see him, and I greet him — “Hey, how you doing?” — and I sit down next to him, and he goes, “It’s funny that you should show up right now.” And I say, “Why?” “Well, I was just sitting here praying, and I said, ‘God, show me a sign that you’re as great as I think you are.’ And then you showed up.”

*[laughter]*

I remember how moved I was by that. And it’s how you enter into the vastness and the spacious place that God holds. But it came by way of knowing that the day won’t ever come when I am as holy as the people I’m called to serve; that the day won’t ever come when I have more courage or am more noble or am closer to God, than this 16-year-old gang member sitting alone on his porch.

**Ms. Tippett:**What your ministry so bespeaks is this incarnational heart of Christianity, but that it always comes down to relationship between people — that that’s where we discover God, as well.

**Fr. Boyle:**Well, it’s relational, but it’s also — I think we’re afraid of the incarnation. And part of it, the fear that drives us is that we have to have our sacred in a certain way. It has to be gold-plated, and cost of millions and cast of thousands or something, I don’t know. And so we’ve wrestled the cup out of Jesus’s hand, and we’ve replaced it with a chalice, because who doesn’t know that a chalice is more sacred than a cup, never mind that Jesus didn’t use a chalice?

And a story I tell in the book about a homie who was — on Christmas Day, I said, “What’d you do on Christmas?” And he was an orphan, and abandoned and abused by his parents, and worked for me in our graffiti crew. And I said, “What’d you do for Christmas?” “Oh, just right here.” I said, “Alone?” And he said, “No, I invited six other guys from the graffiti crew who didn’t had no place to go,” he said. “And they were all...” He named them, and they were enemies with each other. I said, “What’d you do?” He goes, “You’re not gonna believe it. I cooked a turkey.”

*[laughter]*

I said, “Well, how’d you prepare the turkey?” He says, “Well, you know, ghetto-style.” And I said, “No, I don’t think I’m familiar with that recipe.” And he said, “Well, you rub it with a gang of butter, and you squeeze two limones on it, and you put salt and pepper, put it in the oven. Tasted proper,” he said. I said, “Wow. Well, what else did you have besides turkey?” “Well, that’s it, just turkey.”



[laughter]

“Yeah, the seven of us, we just sat in the kitchen, staring at the oven, waiting for the turkey to be done. Did I mention it tasted proper?” I said, “Yeah, you did.”

[laughter]

So what could be more sacred than seven orphans, enemies, rivals, sitting in a kitchen, waiting for a turkey to be done? Jesus doesn't lose any sleep that we will forget that the Eucharist is sacred. He is anxious that we might forget that it's ordinary, that it's a meal shared among friends, and that's the incarnation, I think.

**Ms. Tippett:**In terms of just this idea of incarnation and relationship, it took me a long time into my reading about you, and reading you, to realize that one of the transformative things that happens in Homeboy Industries, which is a different model from your peacemaker days, is that people are simply working, side by side. Kids who may have been in different gangs, they're sharing days and time and jobs. Is that right?

My question also is, does it surprise you, at this point in your life, that some of the structure your vocation has taken is in starting these businesses?

**Fr. Boyle:**Yeah, you don't want to hear me talk about businesses. I'm the least knowledgeable person on how to start. It's like, don't try this at home.

**Ms. Tippett:**Yeah, but you're a CEO. You're an executive director.

**Fr. Boyle:**[laughs] I'm a CEO. Oh, my gosh, I'm a CEO. I'm missing a board meeting to be here today. I could not be one bit happier.

[laughter]

**Ms. Tippett:**Yeah, OK, but look — there's Homeboy Bakery, Homeboy Silkscreen, Homeboy Maintenance, Homeboy/Homegirl Merchandise, Homegirl Café. Those are businesses. You employ people.

**Fr. Boyle:**Yeah, and that came — that was born as — we began as sort of a job employment referral center, trying to find felony-friendly employers.

[laughter]

And that wasn't so forthcoming. So by '92, we had to start our own — we really — so we couldn't wait, the demand was so huge. And gang members kept saying, “If only we

had jobs.” So we started Homeboy Bakery in 1992, and a month later, we started Homeboy Tortillas in the Grand Central Market, a historic kind of area in LA. Once we had two, once we had plural, we came up with the highfalutin “Homeboy Industries,” as if there was any industry involved in this venture.

And then the idea is not just to have a paycheck. But I think one of the new things that I kind of discovered, probably in the last five years, is that community trumps gangs. So it’s not enough to just say, “Here’s a job.” Our motto, still, on our T-shirts is: “Nothing Stops a Bullet Like a Job,” but that does about 80 percent of what needs to be done.

There’s still the other 20 percent, which is relational, and it’s about healing. It’s about what psychologists would call “attachment repair,” because gang members come to us with this disorganized attachment. Mom was frightening, or frightened. And you can’t really soothe yourself if you’ve never been calmed down by that significant person in your life. And it’s never too late to kind of gain this, so they repair this attachment, and they learn some resilience. And then they redefine who they are in the world, which is really a huge task. And then we send them on, beyond us. And then the world will throw at them what it will, but it won’t topple them, because they’re this renewed person. That’s sort of the new piece in the last five years — that there’s a task that happens and needs to be addressed and attended to, and that’s the task.

**Ms. Tippett:** Were you attending to it before, but not as intentionally? It was happening, but you’ve named it now?

**Fr. Boyle:** That’s right, yeah. But things like therapy — everybody’s in therapy. I have 300 employees, and I have four paid therapists, but I have 41 volunteer therapists. So that’s kind of a new openness to that that wasn’t true in my first ten years. Homies would always say, “Oh, I’m not crazy,” and there was a stigma. And then I noticed, I don’t know how many years ago, maybe 15 years ago, homies would — I’d say, “You know, it might help you to talk about all the stuff you’ve been through in your life.” And then a homie once said to me, “You mean like *Analyze This?*”

[laughter]

He referenced that movie with Billy Crystal and Robert De Niro. And then I started hearing that, and you talk about a tipping point, where suddenly, it was OK for people to be in therapy. And so I don’t sense any kind of stigma, which is really healthy and wonderful, because they have a lot of work to do. They’ve been through a lot.

[music: “African Velvet” by Air]

**Ms. Tippett:** You can listen again and share this conversation with Father Greg Boyle through our website, [onbeing.org](http://onbeing.org). I'm Krista Tippett. *On Being* continues in a moment.

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[music: "African Velvet" by Air]

I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today, with Fr. Greg Boyle at the Hall of Philosophy at the Chautauqua Institution. We've been talking about his understandings of life, of service, and of God, which have emerged through his ministry creating Homeboy Industries. It's one of the largest and most successful gang intervention programs in the U.S.

**Ms. Tippett:** I'm going to ask one more question, then why don't we open this up for questions and comments. You, I've read, were diagnosed with leukemia. Would that have been a decade ago now?

**Fr. Boyle:** I think it's probably — I think it's nine years.

**Ms. Tippett:** Nine years. And so you, in a less adrenaline-fueled way than a lot of the people you share a life with, have faced mortality. And I wonder, has that changed the way you move through life, or even this work with them?

**Fr. Boyle:** Yeah, first of all, I wouldn't trade that period of my life for anything. It was about the most graced moment in my life, for as uncomfortable as chemotherapy is — and I'm sure many in the audience have been through this — I wouldn't trade it, because it was just so intimate and so mutual. But with the homies, it was this extraordinary place of exquisite mutuality that I really treasure. I was reading, recently, about the Dalai Lama. He was interviewed in *The New Yorker*, and somebody asked him about his own personal death. And he just shrugged, and he said, "Change of clothing."

[laughter]

And that was sort of my experience when I went through leukemia, and greatly liberating.

But because I've had to bury so many kids — 183 kids, and kids I loved and kids I knew, and killed by kids I loved — boy, if death is the worst thing that can happen to you, brace yourself, because you will be toppled. And the trick is not to be toppled. The trick is to compile a list of all of the fates that are worse than death, but also compile the

list of all the things — and so numerous to list — all the things that are more powerful than death. That's what Jesus did. Jesus sort of put death in its place.

**Ms. Tippett:** Was it after your diagnosis that you discovered this story about the desert fathers and mothers? That the one word they meditated on was ...

**Fr. Boyle:** Oh, yeah.

**Ms. Tippett:** I read that a couple of days ago, as I was getting ready for this, and it's been so helpful for me.

**Fr. Boyle:** Yeah, whenever the desert fathers and mothers would get absolutely despondent and didn't know how they were going to put one foot in front of the next, they had this mantra. And the mantra wasn't "God," and the word wasn't "Jesus," but the word was "today." And that that's sort of the key. There's a play off-Broadway right now, called *Now. Here. This*. And that's kind of my — that's become my mantra. I'm big on mantras. So when I'm walking, or before a kid comes into my office, I always say, "Now. Here. This. Now. Here. This" so that I'll be present and right here to the person in front of me.

**Audience Member 1:** So I'm thinking that you've already told me the answer to this question, which is "Now. Here. This." But I hear you. I am moved by your work. I am moved by the plight of the poor. And I am here for a week, and then I go back to my privileged life in Fairfield County, Connecticut, among my Unitarian Universalist co-congregants. What is the message? What is there to be done, besides shrugging my shoulders and writing a check?

**Fr. Boyle:** Don't stop writing the checks, first of all.

[laughter]

I owe that to my board meeting that's happening right now.

**Audience Member 1:** OK, so I buy the indulgence, and then what happens?

[laughter]

**Fr. Boyle:** That's right. [laughs]

**Ms. Tippett:** Yeah.

**Fr. Boyle:**OK, the answer really is kinship. Everybody's so exhausted by the tenor of the polarity right now in our country. And the division is the opposite of God, frankly. I always think of Dives with Lazarus — Dives is in here not because he's rich, but because he kind of refused to be in relationship with Lazarus — that that parable is not about bank accounts and heaven, it's really about us. And so what's on Jesus's mind? He says that all may be one. And that's kind of where we need to inch our way closer — that we imagine a circle of compassion, then we imagine nobody standing outside that circle. God created, if you will, an otherness so that we would dedicate our lives to a union with each other.

**Audience Member 1:**Thank you.

**Ms. Tippett:**I just want to say, that question you posed so beautifully is a question that weighs on me. I think so many people are carrying that question around right now and feeling pretty hopeless about it. It's an open question, and ...

**Audience Member 1:**Well, we're resisting the divide. We're resisting the divide, but we don't know how to do it.

**Ms. Tippett:**Right.

**Audience Member 1:**We privileged folk.

**Ms. Tippett:**Right, not even the idea that we should create circles of inclusion is — we live so separately that we don't know how to start those relationships. But I — one thing we're not trained to do is — I love Rilke's idea about holding the questions, living the questions until, one day, you live into an answer.

So I think when we don't have the answer immediately before us, we then despair. And I wonder if part of our work now is to hold that question and to pose it with each other. And then, in that way, maybe we become listeners together, and we start to ...

**Audience Member 1:**The Rilke piece is wonderful. Thank you.

**Ms. Tippett:**Oh, over here. Sorry. *[laughs]*

**Audience Member 2:**I grew up in the city and was homeschooled because my parents feared for my safety. And I go to St. Vivian Church, and they don't touch the city because of their fear. And how do you combat the fear with love and compassion?

**Fr. Boyle:**Thank you for your question. I read once that the Beatitudes was — the original language was not "Blessed are" or "Happy are" the single-hearted or those who

work for peace or struggle for justice. The more precise translation is, “You’re in the right place if ...” And I like that better because it turns out the Beatitudes is not a spirituality. It’s a geography. It tells you where to stand. You’re in the right place if you’re over here.

So, I come from Hollywood where we say, “Location, location, location.” And it’s about location. You really have to go out. But knowing that service is the hallway that leads to the ballroom, you don’t want to have service be the end. It’s the beginning. It’s getting you to the ballroom, which is the place of kinship, the place of mutuality, that place that everybody knows here. When you go there, you go, “Who is receiving from whom? Who’s the service provider? Who’s the service recipient?” You hear yourself say that. “I know I’m here at the soup kitchen, but, my God, I’m getting more from this.” You know, everybody knows this. But it doesn’t happen unless you break out. And fear is just fueled by ignorance. So you have to break out of our ignorance. We have to go to the place that frightens us, you know?

And I’m always admiring of employers, especially in the early days before we were kind of established, who would call us. And I’d give a talk somewhere, and an employer would call me and say, “OK, send me somebody. I’m scared, though.” I said, “I get it.” Then they’ll love who they get, some homie who’s enormously eager and a good worker. And then he’ll call and say, “Send me somebody else like him too.” But they had to take that — look before you leap, but leap. Thanks.

**Audience Member 3:** I appreciate your personal stories, the interaction you have, but — the young man on the steps, and the like. But so many in the area where I come from — the way you deal with gangs is, you incarcerate them. And so how much of the interaction have you had with the justice system, the penal system? And how can we, in communities that want to put these “things,” and depersonalize them away — can we do, can be done, societally, congregationally, personally?

**Fr. Boyle:** I don’t spend a lot of time in courts anymore, except that I always testify when asked, and I’m asked a lot in death penalty sentencing cases where there’s a gang member. And I’m called in as a gang expert, because I oppose the death penalty. But I’ve never encountered — and I’ve probably done 50 of these across the country — I’ve never encountered somebody, a gang member who’s on the stand, a defendant, who in my estimation was not mentally ill. The minute you start to hear the profile, and they always give you the profile, you go, wow, this is a deeply disturbed, mentally ill person.

No one wants you to say that. The prosecution refuses you to say anything like that. Even the defense says, “Don’t say anything like that.” Why? Because then you’re forced to — in the face of somebody who’s mentally ill, you can only have one response, and

that's compassion. And this freaks us out, because we go, "Oh, what happens to responsibility?" and "He knew what he was doing." Prosecutors always say to me, "Well, he could choose." I go, gosh, not all choices are created equal, and a person's ability to choose is not created equal.

I don't know, if we were more sensible, at an early age we'd be somehow infusing kids with hope when they can't imagine their future, and they're planning their funerals. Or we'd heal kids who are so damaged that they can't see their way clear to transform their pain, so they continue to transmit it or to deliver mental health services in a timely, effective, appropriate way. If we did those things ...

[*applause*]

If, as a society, we did those things, we wouldn't be at the place we're at.

[*music: "Lo Duca Brothers" by Spaghetti Western*]

**Ms. Tippett:**I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *On Being*. Today, with Fr. Greg Boyle on his longtime, unusually successful work with former gang members in Los Angeles. I interviewed him in the outdoor Hall of Philosophy at the Chautauqua Institution, and we also took questions from the audience.

**Audience Member 4:**Hello. I probably have 50 questions, and it'll be interesting to see which one ...

**Fr. Boyle:**Do 49 of them and ...

[*laughter*]

**Audience Member 4:**Which one comes out. I teach in a community college on the West Coast. And kind of similarly, I teach culinary arts, so I see a whole range of individuals and hear stories that would cripple most of us, what people are dealing with. But I think one of my key questions for you is, when I hear you use the word "homie," could you define what that means to you? As you give these talks around the country, I think about, what are other people taking away from that word, versus what it is that that word means to you.

**Fr. Boyle:**Yeah, sometimes when I go to other parts of the country — I was on a radio show from Chicago where a caller came in who took quite exception to the word, "homeboy." You don't find that so much in Los Angeles. And no thought went into this at all. With a movie producer, I'm trying to get money out of him, and he says, "What do you think I should do?" And he had proposed a lot of ideas, and I said, "Well, I don't

know, why don't you buy this old abandoned bakery across the street? We'll call it 'Homeboy Bakery.'" That's how much thought went into this. So I wasn't kind of measuring and calculating: "Will this have...?"

But in the end, I'm OK with it, because it's sort of like walking in a door and coming out another door. You'll hear homeboys say, "Hey, do you know Mr. Sanchez? He's my math teacher." I said, "No, I don't." "Oh, that's the homie, right there." It's a way of connecting. In the end, it's a word that is soaked with kinship. And if Mother Teresa says the problem in the world is that we've just forgotten that we belong to each other, there's the potential, anyway, I think, for the word "homeboy" and "homegirl" to say that we're connected. It's a way of saying, "We belong to each other," and it doesn't have to do with "He's in my gang, and he isn't." And that's why the homeboy community — and homegirls, as well — are folks who experience this connection and sense of belonging with each other.

**Audience Member 5:** I'm particularly impressed with your using the words "walking in the lowly places." That's where Jesus would stand. But the question I have is, you also talk about the prophetic and the hilarious. And I recall that if you look at the Dalai Lama, Thomas Merton — many of them have this wonderful sense of joy. And you seem to have this sense of humor.

I often find that peacemakers, peacekeepers, are so intense, and the weight is so heavy that there's very little time for laughter. I would like to know how it comes that you have this wonderful spirit of joy, or what I'd call "healthy" humor. And could you explain a little bit how you got that?

**Fr. Boyle:** It's like — I don't know who talked about it — discussing humor is like dissecting a frog. You can do it, but the frog dies in the process.

[laughter]

So I don't know. Again, it's about joy and that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete. You want to have a light grasp on life. And then in the end, it's precisely those kinds of moments that teach you something.

Real quickly, one of my favorites recently was, Diane Keaton showed up for lunch at a Homegirl Café — the Oscar-winning actress, *Annie Hall* and *Godfather* movies. And she's there with a regular guy who's there once a week, and her waitress is Glenda. And Glenda is a homegirl — been there, done that; tattooed, felon, parolee. She doesn't know who Diane Keaton is. And so she's taking her order, and Diane Keaton says,



“Well, what do you recommend?” And Glenda rattles off the three platillos that she really likes, and Diane Keaton says, “Oh, I’ll have that second one. That one sounds good.”

And then it was, suddenly, at that moment, that something dawns on Glenda, and she looks at Diane Keaton. She goes, “Wait a minute. I feel like I know you, like maybe we’ve met somewhere.” And Diane Keaton decides to sort of deflect it humbly and say, “Oh, gosh, I don’t know. I suppose I have one of those faces that people think they’ve seen before.” And then Glenda goes, “No, now I know. We were locked up together.”

*[laughter]*

And aside from the fact that that story absolutely took my breath away when I heard it — and I don’t believe we’ve had any further Diane Keaton sightings, now that I think of it — that in the end, it’s about something. It’s about kinship. It’s about Oscar-winning actress, attitudinal waitress — that you may be one; that’s the whole thing — that God has created this otherness so that you might bump into each other and find that you’re homies, that you were locked up together.

*[applause]*

**Ms. Tippett:***[laughs]* I just want to say, as we close, you said, at the beginning — and I pushed back and said how hard that is — that the job is to be who God is, in the world. As you tell these stories of this life you lead — you told this story in your book about how — and you touched on this a minute ago — you first arrived in the neighborhood, and you expected people to come to you. And you would walk around, and that didn’t work. It was when you started visiting people when they were in hospital or visiting people when they were in prison that they then acknowledged you as a member of the community.

And that’s so resonant with that beautiful passage in Matthew 25, about God saying, “You visited me when I was sick. You clothed me, you fed me.” And they said, “When was that?” “When you fed, clothed, visited the least of these.” So I think it’s wonderful how you show that that is doable, incarnating this incarnational message at the heart of Christianity. And you probably are too humble to want to take that in.

**Fr. Boyle:** Well, thank you for that. But I also feel like in the end, it is about imitating the kind of — trying to imitate the kind of God you believe in. And it’s natural for us to push back on that. But the truth is, we’re so used to a God — a one-false-move God, and so we’re not really accustomed to the no-matter-whatness of God, to the God who’s just plain-old too busy loving us to be disappointed in us. And that is, I think, the hardest

thing to believe, but everybody in this space knows it's the truest thing you can say about God.

**Ms. Tippett:**I wondered if, in closing, you would read this little poem by the 14th-century Persian poet Hafiz, and why you put that in your book. And the fact that it's from the 14th century, I love, because it reminds us that we've always been this way, as human beings.

**Fr. Boyle:**Yeah, I don't know why I put it in my book.

[laughter]

And so now I'm living my nightmare of my interview with Krista Tippett.

[laughter]

Now proven myself shallow and uninteresting. Anyway, it's called "With That Moon Language."

"Admit something: Everyone you see, you say to them, 'Love me.' / Of course you do not do this out loud, otherwise someone would call the cops. / Still, though, think about this, this great pull in us to connect. / Why not become the one who lives with a full moon in each eye that is always saying, / with that sweet moon language, what every other eye in this world is dying to hear?"

**Ms. Tippett:**Thank you, Greg Boyle.

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[applause]

Fr. Greg Boyle is founder and executive director of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles. His books include *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* and more recently, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*.

[music: "Diferente" by Gotan Project]

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**Ms. Tippett:** The On Being Project is located on Dakota Land. Our lovely theme music is provided and composed by Zoë Keating. And the last voice that you hear singing at the end of our show is Cameron Kinghorn.

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