Text of talk given by Fr. Greg Boyle, S.J. at Creighton University, to begin Mission Week.
September 9th, 2019
The link to a [video of the talk is here](https://bluecast.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=313027dd-d0ff-4068-8f5b-aab001422a4d).

Thank you, Daniel, for that kind introduction. I also won a spelling bee in the fifth grade. But you can read about that, I suppose. Thank you, Eileen, wherever you are. There you are.

You know what, in the community where I live, in the Mexican community, it’s kind of a disrespect to “give your *espalda*” to people, to give my back to you. But, I’m sorry, not much I can do.

It was funny, a couple weeks ago when you mention “please put your phones on airplane mode,” I was in a line at Southwest Airlines at LAX. I was in a line with two homies who were going to fly. They’ve never flown before, and we were lining up at Southwest and you know they have the A1-30 that kind of thing. And, so, this kid, Jose, is next to me, and he has a loud ass voice you know, so he says to me “G, can I put my phone on airplane mode?” And I said, “Well, uh, you don’t have to do it right now. On the plane you can still talk. But once they close that door, you have to put it on airplane mode.” And he turned to a lady, a total stranger, and said, “I’ve never done airplane mode before.” And the look on the woman’s face says, “great, yeah.” You know and, he was sort of inviting to live as the poet Rumi says, “in the infinite moment where everything happens.” So, I invite you to this infinite moment, and I am so honored to be here with all of you and privileged to have an honorary degree from this institution.

Two days ago, I celebrated my 47th year. I entered the Jesuits 47 years ago. And, oddly it’s an anniversary I don’t ever remember, but I have - there are 8 of us in my family - all my sibs always email me and remind me of it. And, the homies at Homeboy Industries they do not really know what the whole Jesuit thing is. Even though we’ve always had 2 to 3 Jesuits working there at any given time and we have like five tours a day, folks from all over the world, and they kind of walk around and go to the bakery and watch tattoos being removed and so I’m in my office and its all glass enclosed so I can see out, and a whole group has moved right in front of our office and its “observe our founder in his natural habitat,” you know. And Gilbert also has a loud ass voice and he is telling everybody “this, is Father Greg Boyle. He is the Founder of Homebody Industries. He is a Jujitsu priest”. So, I kind of do my best moves (*making Jujitsu gestures*).

Before I get to what I say, Daniel mentioned our partners, and we call it the global homeboy network and here in Omaha we have a wonderful partner in the Bike Union and Coffee Shop and so I think they are the closet coffee shop to this campus and so I hope you support them because they help employ folks who have been in the foster care system and they are part of our network and so if you can’t get to Los Angeles you can just go help them, a very worthy organization.

So, here’s why I think you’re here: it has very little to do with me, it has to do with your own longing and aspiration. You want to imagine something different. You want to imagine a community of kinship such that God in fact might recognize it. With God, you’re imaging, in this week that you begin and your consideration of the Magis, you’re considering and imagining a circle of compassion and then you are imagining nobody standing outside of that circle. So, part of what you’re invited to, and we’re all invited to, is to dismantle the barriers that exclude.

And so, Pope Francis calls us all to inch ourselves to the margins so that we can plant ourselves there, and then we look under our feet and then we notice that the margins are getting erased precisely because we chose to locate ourselves at the margins. And so, we stand with a particularity, with the poor and the powerless and the voiceless, and we stand with those whose dignity has been denied and you go out there and you stand with those whose burdens are more than they can bear. And, every once in a while, my suspicion is you’ve all had this experience of the privilege of being able to stand with the easily despised and the readily left out, to get to stand with the demonized so that the demonizing will stop. And with the disposable so the day will come when we stop throwing people away.

No kinship, no peace. No kinship, no justice. No kinship, no equality. No matter how singularly focused we may well be on those worthy goals, they actually can’t happen. Unless there is some undergirding sense that we are connected. Mother Teresa diagnosed the world’s ills correctly when she suggested that the problem in the world is that we’ve just forgotten that we belong to each other. So, part of what we imagine in this mission week is to stand against forgetting that we belong to each other. And so, we inch ourselves out to the margins and you brace yourselves because people will accuse you of wasting your time.

But the Prophet Jeremiah writes: “In this place in which you say is a waste, there will be heard again the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voices of those who sing.” And so, you go to the margins and suddenly other voices get heard.

I think none of above makes any sense at all unless our notion of God is spacious and expansive. Theresa of Avila says our notion of God is like a jar that you just keep breaking; and that is to make room for a greater notion of God. St. Ignatius of Loyola talks about the God that’s always greater - the God who loves us without measure and without regret.

We’ve settled for a partial God, and we ought not to. Meister Eckhart who was a theologian and mystic who died maybe 500 years ago – the historians here will correct me – he says it’s a lie, any talk of God that doesn’t comfort you; and I think he’s quite right.

You know, the homies always help me expand the way I see things, a lot of times they’ll do it by way of butchering the English language, which I always find illuminating, not just delightful. Like I had a homegirl named Lisa who came into my office, and she’s a trainee there, a gang member whose been to prison, and she wanted to introduce me to her “man” so she brings him in, he came to pick her up at the end of the day, and she said “this is my sufficient other” and I said “no doubt.”

What allows me to be here and give talks and such is that I have a CEO now who runs the place and we’re a 20-million-dollar annual operation so I’m glad he’s running it and not me. So, I had a homie come into my office and one of our trainees, it was early morning, and he said, “Damn, G, my lady, she is in a bad mood today”. I said “why?” “Well, you know she’s beginning her…. administration period”. And I said, “well, I just finished mine so, I kind of know what she’s going through.”

But, my favorite one happened when I was presiding at the Eucharist at San Fernando Juvenile Hall and it was a big gym, 500 gang members in it. And, I was vested in my alb and my stole and up on raised platform and they have these sheets that have readings in English and Spanish on both sides and you know how you decide when you are presiding, I am just going to listen to the word, proclaimed. And so I put the sheet on my lap and I closed my eyes and the homies came up one by one and did the readings. So the first guy got up and did the first reading. Then the second guy got up for the responsorial psalm and there was kind of an overabundance of confidence in his voice and he gets up and says “The Lord is exhausted.” And I look at the sheet, what the hell, and it was “the Lord is exalted.” And I remember thinking at the time… “that’s way better.”

I remember I had a spiritual director years ago who said to me, “You know, we need a better God than the one we have.” He was a Jesuit, or perhaps a Jujitsu, but of course, he’s right. An exhausted God is more expansive. It’s a God who says, “It’s not about me, it’s about you.” Generous, tender. Otherwise we settle for a partial God, a puny God. My friend Annie Lamott always says, “You know you’ve created God in your own image when God hates the same people you do.” And, you don’t want to do that; you want to dissolve in this love, you want to rest in the stillness of love and love in the stillness of God. And it is a lie, any talk of God that doesn’t comfort you.

Last year I buried my 92-year-old Mama, and you know she died in her own home, her own bed, surrounded by her 8 kids and she was sharp as a tack. I had buried my father 25 years ago, so she lived a quarter of a century by herself. And you know to the very end she was just so alert and sharp. In fact, in the last year of her life she watched so much NSNBC she was becoming Rachel Maddow. And she wasn’t a lick afraid of dying; in fact, a couple of weeks before dying she said to me, just giddy, “I’ve never done this before,” you know which something you might say just before skydiving. In fact, her last words to me were – I happen to be by myself the day before she died, and she was asleep, and she opened her eyes and she saw me there and she said – “awe for crying out loud,” and she went back to sleep. Well, she was pissed off that she was still alive. Sorry.

Well, the next day, just by luck, this never happened, I was there alone, right at noon, she was asleep, she opens her eyes and she lets out this glorious, wonderous gasp – skydiving –and she left us. And nobody in earshot of the sound could ever be afraid of death again. But the weeks before she died, we’d be there, my siblings, three of us, four of us, eight of us around her bed. And when she would come to, she would lock on to one of us and she would say with breathless delight: “You’re here, you’re here.” And when I buried her, I remembered that, and I thought that may well be the singular agenda of the God we have; the God we actually have, not the one we’ve settled for. Behold the one beholding you and smiling. You receive the tender glance and then you go into the world and you extend that tender glance into the world. And then you chose to be in the world who our God is; compassionate, loving, kindness, and tenderness is how you deliver that into the world. Behold the one beholding you and smiling.

And so, at Homeboy Industries part of what we do there is we try to live out that old Buddhist sentence that begins a lot of its writing and it says “Oh, nobly born, remember who you really are. And people return to themselves.” And that is exactly God’s agenda. “Long lay the world in sin and error pining, til he appeared, and the soul felt its worth.” He asked about Jesus and he asked about Christmas but how is it not the job description of everyone in this church, at the moment: you appear, and the soul feels its worth.

Service is a good place to begin and students here of course will begin there but you don’t want to end there. Service is the hallway that gets you to the ballroom. And the ballroom is the place of kinship and exquisite mutuality where there is no “us” and “them,” and there is no daylight that separates us. Otherwise, its service provider and service recipient. There is a distance in service, and you don’t want that. You don’t go to the margins to make a difference; you go to the margins so that the folks in the margins make you different.

I was giving a talk in Houston and a guy who was working with gang members, a former gang member himself, and been to prison, and after my talk he came up to me and kind of pleaded with me: “How do you reach them?” (meaning gang members) and I found myself saying to him “For starters, stop trying to reach them. Can you be reached by them?” I think that’s supposed to happen. Otherwise its service provider and service recipient.

One of the great privileges of my life was knowing Cesar Chavez as a friend and he was absolutely the best listener I have ever been in the presence of. If you were speaking to him, nobody else existed. He was laser beamed focused. He was never looking over your shoulder to see if someone more important was on the approach. Once famously a reporter had commented to him and said wow these farmworkers, they sure love you, and Cesar shrugged and smiled and said, “The feeling’s mutual.” Which of course, it is. You don’t want the distance to exist; you want there to be this exquisite mutuality, no daylight, no service provider, service recipient.

There was a homie named Dreamer who nobody found more job opportunities than this guy. I knew him since he was a little *mococito* growing up in the projects and his older brothers got into a gang and so did he. Super smart kid with a dangerous sense of humor, which I always enjoyed. He is in his forties now, just doing fine, married, home, a construction worker. But in his early twenties, he was a yo-yo kind of in and out of being locked up. I would find him a job in the private sector in one of our social enterprises and he would always gravitate back to vague criminality – usually something involving drugs (the sale of, or the use of). Then he would wander back to me and it was a very repetitious pattern. And, so this one time he had just got out of a four month stretch on probation violation in county jail and there he is sitting in front of my desk and he says what gang members often say, “This time, it’ll be different.” I said, ”Hmm, alright” and so with him sitting there I picked up the phone and I called a friend of mine named Gary who owns a vending machine company and he hired homies in the past so I’m hoping against hope maybe he will do it again and so he says, “Yeah, you tell that guy he can start tomorrow.” That’s a holy man right there. So, Dreamer began working the very next day at the vending machine company. Well, two weeks later there he is sitting in front of my desk, and I couldn’t believe my eyes. I said, “*Hijo de Madre Santa*, here we are all over again.” But this time he reaches into his pocket and pulls out his very first paycheck and waves it proudly and he says, “Damn, G, this paycheck makes me feel proper. I mean, my mom is proud of me, and my kids they’re not ashamed of me. And you know who I have to thank for this job,” and I said “well, who?” and he looked at me strangely and said, “Well, God of course,” I said, “That’s right; that would be God.” He said, “You thought I was going to say you.” I said, “Oh no, God’s number one.” He said, “You are so lucky we’re not living in them ‘Genesis days.’” I said, “I’m sorry, them Genesis days?” and he said, “Yeah because God would been/had-struck your ass down by now.” Well, honest to God, the thing I most remember is that we literally fell out of our chairs, we were just howling. And I defy you to identity exactly who’s the service provider and who’s the service recipient. It’s mutual.

So, Homeboy was started a long time ago; I had hair, it was 1988, I was pastor in the poorest parish in the city of Los Angeles, Delores Mission. It had the largest grouping of public housing west of the Mississippi. That was my parish – Pico Gardens. It had 8 gangs at war with each other and so LAPD said it was the place with the highest concentration of gang activity anywhere in the county – was my parish. So, I buried my first young person killed because of the sadness of 1988 and I buried my 229th two weeks ago.

So, we did a lot of things. First thing we did was we started a school because there were so many junior high middle school age gang members who were given the boot from their home school because nobody wanted them. So, they were reeling havoc in the projects during the day; they were writing on the walls, they were selling drugs, they were violent. So, I walked out to them and I introduced myself and I kind of isolated them and I said, “Hey, if I found a school that would take you, would you go?” And, to my surprise, every single one of them responded, “Yes, we would.” And so, I couldn’t find a school that would take them, so that kind of forced my hand. So right across the street from our church is our elementary parochial school, grades k-8, occupying the first two floors of this building, but the whole third floor is the convent and where the nuns lived and so I gathered all the sisters in their living room one evening and sat them down and I said, “Hey, would you guys mind, moving out and we can turn the convent into a school for gang members,” and so they looked at each other and they said, “Sure,” and that was the entirely of their discernment process.

And so, then that brought gang members in large numbers to the church property which created a disconnect. People in the parish would come up to me and say, “Aren’t churches supposed to be hermetically sealed?” – good people in, and bad people out. So, it presented a good gospel challenge. And then the gang members said, “If only we had jobs”. And so, myself and the women in the parish we marched around the factories that surrounded the projects trying to find felony friendly employers and so that wasn’t so forthcoming and so we just started things - maintenance crew, landscaping crew, a crew to build our childcare center- all made up of members of rival gangs. And then in 1992, after the unrest that follow the Rodney King verdict, the whole city of Los Angeles ignited, except the poorest pocket, which was my parish, and the LA Times wanted to know why that was and I said, “Maybe it’s because we had 60 strategically hired rival enemy gang members working side by side, they had a reason to get up in the morning and a reason not to gang bang the night before and, more to the point of your question, a reason not to torch their own community.

And so, the article appeared the next day and then the following day I was summoned to the office of a movie producer named Ray Stark who happened to have 500 million dollars. He called me into his office in Beverly Hills and he said, “How should I spend my money?” I can see now that I woefully undershot my request; I was young, I had hair. I said, “Well, there’s a tore up, abandoned bakery, across the street from the school. I don’t know, you could buy it. It has ovens, they don’t work, we can fix them. We could put hair nets on rival enemy gang members, and they could bake bread. We could call it, “Homeboy Bakery” That was the extent of my business plan. And he said sure, so we were off and running. It was kind of an exit ramp off this crazy violent freeway of gang violence and a month later we started Homeboy Tortillas in the grand central market. Once we had plural, we changed our name “Jobs for a Future” to “Homeboy Industries,” as if there was any industry involved in this.

Not everything worked, I will always be the first to admit Homeboy Plumbing was not hugely successful; who knew people didn’t want gang members in their homes? Did not see that coming. And now, nobody intends to do such a thing but now we’ve backed our way into becoming the largest gang intervention rehabilitation program – reentry program – on our planet. Upwards of 15,000 folks a year walk through our door trying to reimagine their futures, to gain some resilience, to reidentify who they are in the world.

In the early days it was “nothing stops a bullet like a job.” That’s when we listened to gang members. But after we got to know gang members, probably the last 15 years has been about healing; we’ve gone from job centered to healing centric and because they all are hugely traumatized and carry more than I have ever had to carry. And so, they encounter a community of tenderness that welcomes them, and they learn how to cherish themselves and then they leave us after 18 months and the world will throw at them what they will and this time they won’t be toppled by it.

They kind of find Homeboy as a sanctuary, and then they become that sanctuary the sanctuary they sought, and then they go home, and they present that sanctuary to their children and suddenly you’ve broken a cycle. It’s a holy tender place and I have a lot of services; tattoo removal, therapy, classes, and we have nine social enterprises: electronic recycling, we have several restaurants, a homeboy diner at city hall, a we have a restaurant at LAX, farmers markets. We have a thing called Homeboy grocery where we sell chips, salsas, guacamole at a variety of supermarkets on both coasts. Homegirl Café, where women with records, young ladies from rival gangs, waitresses with attitudes will gladly take your order. It’s kind of a famous place, you know, you will run into movie stars; Jim Carrey always creates pandemonium when he eats there. Jack Black and Forest Whitaker. A lot of elected officials. When Joe Biden was vice president, two hours’ notice, secret service called and he wanted to have lunch at the famous Homegirl Café, and so his motorcade and entourage and selfies with “Uncle Joe.” I think the homies found him quite affectionate, I don’t think any of them complained about that, though. He was very welcomed, the homies felt special.

Most famously of all, Diane Keaton came, Oscar winner in Annie Hall, the Godfather movies. Her waitress was Glinda, big girl, been there, done that, tattooed, felon, parolee, she has no idea who Diane Keeton is and so she’s taking her order and Diane Keaton says well what do you recommend and Glinda rattles off the three dishes she particularly likes and Diane Keaton says, “Well, I’ll have that second one, that one really sounds good.” It’s at that moment that something dawns on Glinda, she looks at Diane Keaton and says, “Wait a minute. I feel like I know you from somewhere, maybe we’ve met,” and Diane Keaton decides to deflect it humbly and says, “Oh, gosh, I don’t know, I SUPPOSE I have one of those faces that people think they’ve seen before,” and Glinda says, “No, now I know, we were locked up together.” And that just took my breath away. When I heard it, I don’t BELIEVE we had any more Diane Keaton sightings now that I think of it. But suddenly, kinship so quickly – Oscar winning actress attitudinal waitress. Exactly what God had in mind and we need go no further than to hear Jesus say to the gathered, “That you may be one.” I suppose he could have been more self-referential. But it’s about us reflecting the exhausted God we have; it’s about us.

In the original covenantal relationship God says, “ As I have loved you so must you have a preferential care and love for the widow, orphan, and the stranger. God chooses these three subgroupings of the poor because God thinks these are the folks who know what it’s like to have been cut off and, because they have suffered in exactly this way, God thinks they happen to be our trustworthy guides to lead the rest of us to the kinship of God. These were the categories of people who did not matter, or as the theologian Ron Rolheiser says, “What it meant in those days were, ‘these are the groups we can live without you.’” And exquisit mutuality at the margins says ,”We can’t live without you,” therefore the Jesuits of the world talk about their apostolic universal preferences, and they include in that walking with the excluded. That’s why you do it – you don’t go to the margins to make a difference, you go to the margins so that the widow, orphan, and stranger can make you different. And that is where the joy is.

All of us are called to be enlightened witnesses: people who through your kindness and tenderness and focused attentive love return people to themselves. At Homeboy we are allergic to the notion of holding the bar up and asking folks to measure up, instead we hold a mirror up and we tell people the truth. “Oh, nobly born, remember who you really are. You are here. You are here.” And the soul feels its worth.

At Homeboy we are used to reaching in and dismantling the messages of shame and disgrace that get in the way, that keep people, from seeing their truth. For the principle suffering of the poor throughout history and throughout scripture is shame and disgrace. There is a line in the Acts of the Apostles that just leaps out at you, and it says simply, “And awe came upon everyone,” and it suggests that the measure of health in any community at all, including this one, may well reside in our ability to stand in awe at what the poor have to carry, rather than stand in judgement at how they carry it.

A handful of years ago I was invited to speak to 600 social workers in Richmond, Virginia. It was what they called a gang Inservice and it was from 9-5 at a hotel ballroom and it was keynotes and workshops and break-out sessions; I have been to several of these. I figured maybe I’d do a keynote and so I said yes, and I bought my ticket. Well a week before I was to fly, I pull out the letter, and to my horror, I discovered that I was to be the only speaker from 9-5 all damn day. And as the homies say, “Oh, helllll no”. And so I invited two trainees in, two gang members, Andre and Jose, and I sat them down. Each were kind of in their 9th month of their 18 months with us and so I sat them down and said, “Look, you are flying with me at the end of the week to Richmond Virginia, I’d like you to get up in front of 600 social workers, I’d like you to tell your stories. Take your time. We have long ass day to fill.” Well, I had never heard their stories and so Jose gets up first and he’s 25 years old at the time, gang member, been to prison, tattooed. At that moment, in about his 8th to 9th month, he had become a valued member of our substance abuse team. A man solid in his own recovery and now he’s helping younger homies and homegirls with their addiction issues. He also had a long stretch as a homeless man and an even longer stretch as a heroine addict. He gets up in front of 600 social workers and he says, “I guess you could say my mom and me, we didn’t get along so good. I think I was 6 when my mom looked at me and she said, ‘why don’t you just kill yourself; you’re such a burden to me.’” Well 600 social workers audibly gasp, and he says, “It sounds way worser in Spanish”, and they did what you just did, and we got whiplashed going from gasp to laugh. And then he continued, “I guess I was 9 when my mom drove me down to the deepest part of Baja, California, and she walks up to an orphanage and she knocks to the door and the guy comes to the door and she says, ‘I found this kid,’ and she left me there. For 90 days, until my grandmother could get out of her where she dumped me, and my grandmother came and rescued me. My mom beat me every single day of my elementary school years with thing you could imagine and a lot of things you couldn’t. Every day my back was bloody and scarred; in fact, I had to wear three t-shirts to school each day. First t-shirt because the blood would seep through; second t-shirt you could still see the blood; finally, the third t-shirt you couldn’t see any blood. Kids at school, they make fun of me, ‘Aye fool, it’s 100 degrees, why you are wearing three t-shirts.’” And then he stopped speaking and he seemed to be staring at a piece of his story that only he could see. And when he regained his speech he said through his tears, “I wore three t-shirts well into my adult years because I was ashamed of my wounds. I didn’t want anyone to see them. Now I welcome my wounds, I run my fingers over my scars, my wounds are my friends. After all, how can I help heal the wounded if I don’t welcome my own wounds?” And awe came upon everyone.

The measure of our compassion lies not in our service of those on the margins but only in our willingness to see ourselves in kinship with them. For the truth of the matter is this: if we don’t welcome our own wounds, we may be tempted to despise the wounded.

And so, we go from here to the margins and we decide to take seriously what Jesus took seriously and there are only four things. They are big things: inclusion, nonviolence, unconditional loving kindness, and compassionate acceptance. That’s not so much what we do at the margins, that’s how we are at the margins. And then we look under our feet and we notice that they are getting erased because we chose to stand there.

I was interviewed many years ago by the Christian Broadcast Network and this woman asked what we do at Homeboy Industries and I told her much of what I told you, “We receive gang members and we hold them in a community of tenderness where healing can happen. Where they can get respite from their chronic, toxic stress. Job training, tattoo removal, therapy, classes, the nine social enterprises where enemies work side by side with each other. I went on at some length. At the end, after I finished and I took a breath, and she sort of made a face and said “Yeah, but how much time do you spend each day at Homeboy Industries, you know, praising God?” I didn’t know what to say, so I said, “All damn day,” and I don’t think she liked that answer very much.

But it begs this question, and I’ll end with this: what kind of praise does our exhausted God have any interest in? It’ll occur to universities sometimes to force their students to read my book against their will. I’m not complaining. My alma mater, Gonzaga University in Spokane, had forced the incoming freshman to read it and they wanted me to go there and speak in a big venue with 1000 people. I said sure and they asked me to bring 2 homies with me. I do, when it’s a longer trip and people are going to pay for it. I always pick homies in the same way; I always pick enemies, rivals from different gangs among our trainees just to force them to share a hotel room with each other, just to mess with them. I also pick homies who have never flown before just for the thrill of seeing gang members panicked in the sky.

Some years ago, I had two older *vatos* and we were at LAX and we were flying to Washington DC and one of them, dead serious said, “Aye, G, are we flying Virgin airlines because its our first time?” I said, “Yes, it’s a requirement. We will be coming home on American.” So, I picked two homies, Bobby, an African American gang member who at that time worked at the bakery, and Mario, who worked in the merchandise store where we sell our logo stuff. I’ve done this a thousand times, easily, with both men and women. I have never had anybody fly with me who was more terrified, absolutely petrified to the bone, then this guy, Mario. It was actually starting to freak me out a little bit. He was hyperventilating and we hadn’t even boarded the plane yet. So, we are at Burbank airport which is kind of a smallish airport, big bay windows, and Southwest airlines, big planes though. They don’t have that hermetically sealed chute to board the plane; you have to walk out onto the tarmac,, like you’re the president and you climb up the steps to go up to the front of the plane, and the big feature at Burbank, you have the steps to go to the back of the plane. So, I am sitting there with Mario, Bobby’s off walking somewhere, and our plane arrives, and people are deplaning, you know its early morning. I turn to Mario and I said, “That’s gonna be our plane.” (He starts hyperventilating) and I think “Wow, he may die before we actually walk up those stairs.” And then I see our flight crew arrives, our pilots, and there are two flight attendants, females, and both of them have two cups each of very large of cups of Starbucks coffee. They are schlepping up the front steps to board the plane and Mario says, “When are we going to board the plane?” and I said, “Well, as soon as they sober up the pilots; there they go now”. Perhaps I shouldn’t have said that.

I should have told you that in the 31 years in history as an organization, Mario is the most tattooed individual who has ever worked there, which is saying a lot; He is all sleeved-out, neck blackened with the name of his gang, head shaved covered in tattoos, forehead, cheeks, chin, eyelids that say “the end” so when he is laying in his coffin, there will be no doubt for anybody, I guess. I am walking him around the airport trying to calm him down and I have never been in public with him and mothers are crutching their kids a little more closely and I thought, Wow, that’s curious, because if you were to go to HomeBoy tomorrow and you said, “Quick, who is the kindest, most gentle soul who works here?” They won’t say me, they will think for half a second and then say, “Mario, yeah, Mario, he works in the café.” He is proof that “only the soul who ventilates the world with tenderness has any chance of changing the world.” He is proof of what John Vanier, “The highest form of spiritual maturity is tenderness.”

So, we get to Gonzaga and of course there’s the big talk Tuesday night but what they don’t tell you is that they have 93 other talks that they didn’t tell you about; this class, this lunch, this meeting, this class, all damn day. So, I tell Bobby and Mario, I am not going to speak at any of these, you get up, I am going to sit in the back of the classroom. They get up, and especially Mario is quite terrified, but they do a good job: stories of terror, torture, violence, abuse of every imaginable kind. Honest to God, if their stories had been flames, you would have to keep your distance, otherwise you’d get torched. I would not have survived a single day of either of their childhoods. We get to the big venue that Tuesday night, 1,000 people, and I get them to come up before I speak, and they each do 7 minutes, a snapshot, of their lives. Then I do my thing and then I pull them up to stand on either side for a Q and A and a women stands and she says, “Yeah, I got a question, its for Mario,” first question, right out the gate, and Mario is this tall, skinny, drink of water, and he steps up and he clutches the microphone and he is just terrified, ,”Yes?” and she says, “well, you say you are a father and you have a son and daughter and they are about to enter their teenage years, what wisdom do you impart to them? You know, what advice do you give to them?” Mario closes his eyes and he clutches all over again, this microphone, and he is starting to tremble and he’s getting a frigging hernia trying to come up with whatever the hell he is going to say when suddenly he blurts out and says, “I just…” and as soon as he says those two words, he rushes back to his microphone clutching, closed eyes refuge, and now I know he is going to lose the battle with his tears, but he wants to get the whole sentence out. He says, “I, I just don’t want my kids to turn out to be like me!” And there is silence. Until the woman who asked the question stands and now it is her turn to cry, “Why would you not want your kids to turn out like you? You are loving; you are kind; you are gentle; you are wise. I hope your kids turn out to be like you.” And a thousand total perfect strangers stand, and they will not stop clapping. All Mario can do is hold his face in his hands so overwhelmed that this room full of strangers had returned him to himself; let there be no doubt that everybody standing had been returned to themselves, which shouldn’t surprise us because, its mutual.

I think that is the only praise our exhausted God has any interest in. Tender glace, tender glance. “You’re here. You’re here.”

And it is a lie, any talk of God that doesn’t comfort you. So, we go to the margins, and not to make a difference, but to enter this exquisite mutuality where the soul feels its worth. “Oh, nobly born, remember who you really are.” “You’re here, you’re here.”

And soon enough you cease to care whether anyone accuses you of wasting your time. “For in this place in which you say it is a waste, there will be heard again the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness; the voices of those who sing.”

Thank you very much.