Tattoos on the Heart

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF GREGORY BOYLE

Greg Boyle grew up in Los Angeles with his parents and seven siblings. He was raised Catholic, and after he gradated high school in 1972 he entered the Jesuit Order. Over the next decade, Boyle gained undergraduate degrees in philosophy and English, a master's degree in English, and a Master of Divinity Degree. In 1984, he became a priest. Since this time, Boyle's work has focused on gang violence in the city of Los Angeles. He's founded a successful nonprofit called Homeboy Industries, which specializes in employing rehabilitated gang members. Boyle is on the advisory board for Loyola Law School. His work campaigning against gang violence has made him one of the most beloved and respected figures in his city. Boyle was diagnosed with cancer in the early 2000s, and while he's "slowing down" somewhat due to his age and medical condition, he continues with his religious and nonprofit work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While Boyle's book is about the city of Los Angeles from the 1980s to the present, it doesn't have a lot of explicit information about the city's history during this time. Two important events to which Boyle alludes, however, are the Los Angeles Riots of 1992 and the crack epidemic of the 1980s. The riots occurred following the acquittal of the police officers who brutally beat Rodney King, a black man who was being pulled over on the freeway. The massive riot in that followed resulted in deaths, injuries, and millions of dollars in property damage. The gang situation in Los Angeles was greatly exacerbated by the burgeoning drug market of the 1980s, the decade during which crack cocaine became extremely popular and cheap in many American cities, including Los Angeles.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

For a thorough, literarily constructed history of Los Angeles gangs, readers might check out *Gangs of Los Angeles* (2007) by William Dunn. For a more personal take on the subject, Sanyika Shakur's memoir *Monster: The Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member* is a modern classic. The crime novels of James Ellroy, especially *White Jazz* (1992) and *The Cold Six Thousand* (2001), also share some subject matter with *Tattoos on the Heart*, though they're written in a far more pessimistic register.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion
- **When Written:** 2008-2009
- **Where Written:** Los Angeles, California
- **When Published:** Fall 2010
- **Literary Period:** none
- **Genre:** memoir
- **Setting:** Los Angeles, California
- **Climax:** none
- **Antagonist:** Gang violence
- **Point of View:** First person (Boyle)

EXTRA CREDIT

Celebrity endorsements. *Tattoos on the Heart* had many fans, including the Hollywood actor (and Los Angeles native) Martin Sheen.

Legend. In 2011, Boyle was inducted into the California Hall of Fame, an elite group whose former inductees include such California icons as Ronald Reagan, Steve Jobs, and John Wayne.

PLOT SUMMARY

Beginning in the 1980s, Father Gregory Boyle began to preach from the Dolores Mission church, located in one of the poorest parts of the city of Los Angeles. Boyle, a Jesuit by training, witnessed the extent of the gang violence in his new community. Teenagers and even little children were killed every week, and there was an overall mood of hopelessness. Boyle decided that he would use his religious training to address these terrifying problems. He reformed the rules of the church and made a point of welcoming all people, gang members or not, to Mass. He also founded a school program for gang members who'd been kicked out of their ordinary schools. Finally, with the help of the powerful philanthropist Ray Stark, he founded a nonprofit called Homeboy Industries. This company was designed to provide employment, tattoo removal, psychiatric counseling, and other services for ex-gang members looking to change their lives.

Boyle's memoir is structured around the dozens of young people with whom he's interacted over the years. Each chapter discusses different gang members and ex-gang members Boyle meets, and the moral lessons Boyle learns from them.

One of the hardest parts of Boyle's job is to bury the dead. He's buried well over one hundred people, many of them kids, since beginning his tenure at the Dolores Mission Church. At funerals, Boyle witnesses a strong, overarching sense of shame

and self-hatred among the attendees. Many of the people who live in the area hate themselves—they don't believe they're worthy of love. This is the very reason that so many people join gangs, Boyle believes; they don't believe they're entitled to anything better. And yet Boyle remembers some young people he's worked with, who develop a sense of self-respect, and manage to get away from the gang life and build families and careers for themselves.

Boyle is still amazed by how quickly tough gang members break down when he shows them kindness and decency. Many of these gang members have never had parents or friends to show them support—and that's partly why they join gangs. Boyle is inspired by the example of Jesus Christ. Christ spent his time with social outcasts—"sinners" who'd been abandoned by the rest of their community. Boyle emulates Christ by extending a welcome to everyone, no matter how intimidating-looking or disrespectful.

Another important theme of Boyle's time in Los Angeles is kinship—the sense of deep connection, love, and compassion for all other people. Many of the people who live in Los Angeles refuse to extend their love to people other than their friends and family. One reason that people do this is that they become too focused on material success and forget their obligations to their fellow human beings. But Boyle argues that people should feel kinship with all other people, no matter how different. Boyle has thought about the concept of kinship a lot in recent years, especially since he was diagnosed with leukemia in the early 2000s. When he recognizes kinship and treats the gang members in Homeboy Industries with respect and love, the gang members become proud, responsible, and kind.

Boyle concludes by encouraging his readers to listen to "the voices from the margins."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Father Gregory Boyle – Father Gregory Boyle is the narrator and protagonist of *Tattoos on the Heart*. For more than thirty years, he has lived in Los Angeles, preaching from his church in the Dolores Mission and running Homeboy Industries, a nonprofit that specializes in helping ex-convicts find work. Boyle focuses his efforts on responding to the threat of gang violence in the impoverished parts of Los Angeles. Gang violence, he argues, makes people frightened, cruel, and unwilling to accept the unconditional love that is their birthright as human beings. Boyle nurtures close relationships with hundreds of youths, many of whom are guilty of serious crimes. Instead of judging his students, congregants, and employees, Boyle treats them with compassion and respect (as well as some occasional, well-timed sarcasm). In doing so, Boyle models his conviction that mankind's purpose is to embrace kinship—in other words, love and loyalty for other people, no matter how superficially "different" they might be. Boyle is a talented community organizer, and he's realistic enough to recognize that, while admirable, his efforts in Los Angeles are a mere drop in the bucket compared to the overall scope of the problem of gang violence. Nevertheless, he takes great pride in the good work that he's done, and continues to devote himself to the doctrine of kinship even after he's diagnosed with cancer.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Danny – An eighteen-year-old kid, the first of many whom Father Gregory Boyle buries during his time in Los Angeles.

Ray Stark – Famous Hollywood agent who funds Father Gregory Boyle's nonprofit work.

Luis – Former drug dealer who works as a foreman at Homeboy Industries.

Julian of Norwich – English mystic who influenced Father Gregory Boyle's thinking.

Lula – Young ex-gang member who works for Homeboy Industries.

Bill Cain – Friend and "spiritual director" to Father Gregory Boyle.

Mike Wallace – Famous news anchor who interviews Father Gregory Boyle and visits his church in Los Angeles.

Willy – Young man who asks Father Gregory Boyle for money.

Rigo – Impoverished child of an abusive drug addict.

Cesar – One of Father Gregory Boyle's employees at Homeboy Industries.

Scrappy – Aggressive man who later works for Father Gregory Boyle.

Carmen – Heroin addict and prostitute.

Napoleón Gonzalez – Young gang member who doesn't want to use his real name around Father Gregory Boyle.

Cricket / William – Young gang member who begins to open up to Father Gregory Boyle when Boyle uses his real name.

Speedy – Young gang member who risks his life walking through rival gang territory.

Yolanda – Pious woman who tells Speedy she cares about him.

Betito – Young, lively kid who's killed in a fight between gang members.

Petra Saldana – One of Father Gregory Boyle's congregants, who insists that Boyle leave a piece of insulting, racist graffiti that appeared on the church.

Looney – Gang member who admits to Father Gregory Boyle that he wants to have a life.

Anthony – Drug dealer who becomes a mechanic.

Dennis – Mechanic friend to Father Gregory Boyle.

Matteo – Los Angeles native who grew up going to Father Gregory Boyle's church.

Julian – Los Angeles native who grew up going to Father Gregory Boyle's church.

Memo – Former student of Father Gregory Boyle who goes on a lecture tour with him.

Miguel – Former student of Father Gregory Boyle who goes on a lecture tour with him.

Cisco Martinez – Young man who's murdered in a gang fight.

George Martinez – Brother of Cisco Martinez.

Terry – Young woman who, Father Gregory Boyle realizes, thinks that she's going to die soon.

Natalie Urritia – Employee of Father Gregory Boyle and mother of two children.

Andres – Teenager who forgives his mother for abusing him for years.

Jason – An employee of Homeboy Industries.

Fabian – A former employee of Homeboy Industries who now has a wife and three kids.

Felipe – Employee of Homeboy Industries, who comes from a gang that is the rival of Fabian's former gang, and who later accompanies Father Gregory Boyle on his trip to Washington, D.C.

Elias Montes – Teenager who accepts an award on Father Gregory Boyle's behalf.

Omar – Teenager who asks Father Gregory Boyle when the gang violence will end.

David – Teenager who practices his vocabulary with Father Gregory Boyle.

Grumpy – Aggressive gang member whose tattoos Father Gregory Boyle removes.

Psycho – Gang member who's murdered, and supposedly dreams about his own death beforehand.

Carlos – Friend of Psycho.

Leo – Young ex-gang member who works for Homeboy Industries

Joey – Former gang member who takes a job at Chuck E. Cheese.

Bugsy – Former gang member who asks Father Gregory Boyle to buy him shoes.

Bear – One of the two gang members responsible for accidentally injuring a woman.

Johnny – One of the two gang members responsible for accidentally injuring a woman (who turns out to be Johnny's own mother).

Junior – Local resident who drinks heavily.

Flaco – Drug dealer who miraculously survives a car crash.

Chepe – Local ex-gang member who drives out of town with Father Gregory Boyle.

Richie – Local ex-gang member who drives out of town with Father Gregory Boyle.

Beto – Mexican prisoner who prepares a delicious **stew**.

Clever – Employee of Homeboy Silkscreen

Travieso – An old rival of Clever's.

Lupe – Elderly woman who mentions an image of the Virgin Mary appearing on a tortilla.

Moreno –Young ex-gang member who works for Homeboy Industries.

Olivier – Young ex-gang member who works for Homeboy Industries.

Frankie – Young ex-gang member who smells Mario's chest.

Mario – Young ex-gang member who works for Homeboy Industries.

Rickie – Gang member and the brother of Jacob and Adam.

Jacob – Young brother of Adam and Rickie, who's killed in a turf war.

Adam – Gang member and the brother of Rickie and Jacob.

Mother Teresa – Famous missionary and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, who influenced the religious thinking of Father Gregory Boyle.

Freddy – Young ex-gang member who works for Homeboy Industries.

La Shady – Young woman who loses her partner in a gang shootout.

Ronnie – Ex-gang member who's murdered shortly before he leaves to join the Marines.

Soledad – Mother of Ronnie.

Louie – Young ex-gang member who works for Homeboy Industries.

Lencho – Young ex-gang member who works for Homeboy Industries.

Richard – Young ex-gang member who works for Homeboy Industries.

Laura Bush – First Lady of the United States from 2001 to 2009.

Fili – An employee of Father Gregory Boyle

Spider – Young ex-gang member who works for Homeboy Industries.

Israel – Young ex-gang member who works for Homeboy Industries.

Tony – Young ex-gang member who works for Homeboy

Industries.

Manny – Ex-gang member who's shot and killed.

Bandit – Young ex-gang member who works for Homeboy Industries

Alex – Ex-gang member who accompanies Father Gregory Boyle on his trip to Washington, D.C.

Charlie – Ex-gang member who accompanies Father Gregory Boyle on his trip to Washington, D.C.

Chico –Ex-gang member who works for Homeboy Industries and who's shot and killed.

Artie A former gang member who at first refuses to engage with former members of other gangs. But humor breaks down the wall between him and a former rival gang memberArtie, and the two become great friends.

Marcos A gang member who impresses Boyle by his joy and love for his son.

Pedro A former gang member who recovered from a drug addiction. After he recovered his brother died, but he didn't allow his pain to cause push him back into addiction.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

KINSHIP

In *Tattoos on the Heart*, Father Gregory Boyle devotes a lot of time to outlining the principles that have guided him across his long career. The most important of those principles is kinship. Simply defined, kinship is the state of being intimately connected to other people—of loving them and being unconditionally loyal to them. Boyle tries to show kinship throughout the book to set an example for others, mainly through welcoming anyone into his church, including (and especially) gang members, and for providing classes for young gang members who've been kicked out of school. He's also the founder of Homeboy Industries, a nonprofit that provides employment, psychiatric counseling, tattoo removal, and other valuable services for former members of Los Angeles gangs. Over the course of the book, Boyle unpacks the term "kinship" and shows why it's been so important to his work as a priest, a community organizer, and a nonprofit founder.

From the beginning, Boyle emphasizes that kinship is an "all or none feeling." In other words, kinship means having respect, compassion, and love for all human beings—not just friends, family, or people of the same nationality or culture. Boyle argues that people instinctively want to help others—not because these others share their tastes or background, but simply because they're people. However, in modern society, the feeling of kinship is constantly under attack. People are encouraged to associate with people who are like them, resulting in a narrower form of "appreciation" for others, rather than the universal, open-hearted sense of kinship.

In the housing projects of Los Angeles, Boyle sees a particularly deadly form of assault on kinship: gang culture. Gangs only associate with other members of their gang, and they're sworn to fight their rivals. In many ways, Boyle sees it as his true mission to spread kinship to the residents of Los Angeles, breaking down the barriers of gang culture and economic segregation. By hiring *any* former gang member at Homeboy Industries, Boyle creates an environment in which former rivals have to work together and get along. Using his enormous charisma and talent for moral education, Boyle inspires his employees and students to transcend their hatred. Throughout the book, Boyle provides moving examples of members of rival gangs becoming fast friends, or becoming kind, loving fathers as a consequence of Boyle's unconditional support. Boyle's emphasis on universal kinship inspires some ex-gang members to spend their lives treating other people with kindness and respect. This suggests that kinship can be like a virus, spreading from person to person at an exponential rate.

Boyle adds two important qualifying points about kinship. First, Boyle makes it clear that kinship *doesn't* mean erasing all differences between oneself and other people. Throughout the book, Boyle makes it clear that he disagrees with some of his gang member employees, or even finds them annoying at times. The beauty of kinship, however, is that it enables people to respect and get along with people who they don't see eye-to-eye with, or even particularly like. Second, there's a difference between kinship and helping other people. Helping others is admirable, but kinship is a more spiritual and personal way of relating to other people. To clarify this distinction, Boyle cites the example of Jesus Christ, who lived alongside the poor and suffering without always trying to improve their lives in any material way. Jesus offered his followers something different—and, in Boyle's view, more valuable—than material help. He gave them a sense of universal, unconditional compassion by sharing their lives without judging them or treating them like a problem to be fixed. Boyle has been criticized for prioritizing kinship over bettering people's lives in measurable, material ways (such as giving them money or food). While Boyle *has* bettered people's lives by giving them stable jobs and, in some cases, successful careers, he insists that these forms of "success" are less important than fostering a sense of kinship in the community.

CHRISTIANITY

Father Gregory Boyle is tolerant of many different cultures, lifestyles, and religions. Nevertheless, he advances the argument that a good life, characterized by kinship and compassion for others, is only possible if one worships God and accepts Jesus Christ.

In almost every chapter of *Tattoos on the Heart*, Boyle makes comparisons between episodes from his life and episodes from the life of Jesus Christ. Boyle certainly isn't suggesting that he's a modern-day Jesus—rather, he's suggesting that people should model their lives on the life of Jesus Christ. Boyle wants Christians to devote their lives to caring for other people, as Christ did. Furthermore, he argues that good Christians should go beyond the act of caring for other people—they should immerse themselves in the lives of others. Put a different way, Boyle believes that it's not enough simply to give lots of money to charity, or even to volunteer in homeless shelters—people have a duty to respect others and get to know them with compassion, rather than simply regarding them as mouths to feed. This is one reason why being a Christian and leading a good life are, in Boyle's opinion, one and the same. By modeling their behavior on Christ's, people do more good than they'd otherwise do: they not only accomplish measurable, good deeds—they also become better, more compassionate people.

But the embrace of Christianity isn't only about imitating specific Christian deeds, Boyle writes. It's also important that people accept the existence of an almighty, loving God. The belief in such a God is important because it necessarily includes the belief that boundless, unconditional love is possible. This belief is one of the most important that Boyle tries to impart in his capacities as teacher, priest, and organizer. Boyle gives many examples of employees and troubled gang members who commit horrible crimes because they don't think that they're worthy of love—and seem not to believe that unconditional love is possible. By exposing these people to Christianity and the concept of boundless love, Boyle encourages them to treat other people with respect, and accept that they, too, are worthy of love. The book is full of inspiring stories of people who turn their lives around because of Boyle's teachings on love and kinship. One such man, an ex-convict named Speedy, makes the decision to get a job, marry, and have children after (and, according to Boyle, because) a church congregant tells him that "it would break [her] heart in two" if anything happened to him.

In general, *Tattoos on the Heart* isn't exactly a theological text, but it's full of important Christian ideas. Above all, Boyle stresses that worshipping God is the key to a good, moral life. It is not enough to want to be good, Boyle argues: people need to accept the existence of total love, as represented by God, and they need a role model (Jesus Christ) on whom to base their own moral behavior. When they accept God and Jesus in their lives, Boyle argues, people—even serious criminals—are capable of living upright, moral lives and redeeming their sinful behavior.

GANGS AND GANG VIOLENCE

In the Dolores Mission neighborhood of Los Angeles where Father Gregory Boyle works, violence is a constant danger—the city has a long history of racial discrimination, police brutality, and drug trafficking. Boyle argues that people join gangs not because they're inherently violent people, but because they don't see themselves as having any good alternative to the supposed security and emotional support that gangs and gang culture provide. While Boyle doesn't give an "insider's look" at Los Angeles gangs, he writes about the horrific *effects* of gangs and gang violence on his community. Over the years, Boyle has organized the funerals of almost two hundred victims of gang violence, many of them no older than fifteen. Furthermore, he describes the overall mood of despair that exists in communities dominated by the threat of violence. More than anything else, it could be argued, gang violence is the evil that Boyle has tried to defeat over his career.

One of the most important points that Boyle makes about gangs is that they're conditional in their love, and therefore they are the opposite of the unconditional Christian love that Boyle stands for. Gangs provide a network of support, both emotional and financial, for impoverished Los Angeles residents. However, this support comes with some strings attached: if the gang members don't abide by the rules, obey their superiors, or commit crimes when ordered, they'll be horribly punished. It's no wonder, Boyle writes, that gang members live in a more or less constant state of fear—they're terrified not only of other gangs, who might be trying to kill them, but also of their own "friends." Embedded in hierarchical and violent gang culture, many of the people in Boyle's community struggle to show or respond to compassion. They're so used to being hurt and threatened that the concept of someone being unconditionally kind to them is utterly and tragically foreign. Boyle suggests that it is largely because of the overall mood of fear and despair—not just the concrete economic motives—that people continue to commit crimes in the Dolores Mission.

At times, Boyle can be exceptionally harsh in his analysis of gang violence and the culture that surrounds gang violence. When writing about teen pregnancies in the Dolores Mission, he argues that young women choose to become mothers out of wedlock—"before they're ready"—because they think they're going to die soon, and want to "accelerate the whole process." Boyle's observation—which implies that young, impoverished women are deliberately having children they know they won't be able to support—evokes the political rhetoric of "blaming the victims"; in other words, suggesting that impoverished people in Dolores are primarily responsible for their own suffering. At the same time, however, Boyle maintains that the residents of

the Dolores Mission are fundamentally good people who have been hurt and misled by the influence of gang violence. In his religious teaching and his nonprofit work, Boyle hopes to undo some of the harmful influences of gang violence and tap into people's potential for goodness.

THE OUTCAST

One of the most important words that Father Gregory Boyle uses in *Tattoos on the Heart* is "outcast." Boyle uses this word to describe most of the people who attend his church in the Dolores Mission, as well as the people whom his nonprofit, Homeboy Industries, employs. He doesn't use the word in a prejudicial sense—rather, he's just stating a fact: the majority of society has rejected these people, refusing to give them employment, friendship, or respect. Over the course of the book, Boyle unpacks the word "outcast" and uses it to make his own compelling points about how all people deserve to be treated.

From the beginning, Boyle makes it clear that being an outcast is nothing to be ashamed of. Just because society has cast a person out doesn't mean that that person is worthless. To emphasize this point, Boyle frequently alludes to Jesus Christ and the fact that he spent his time with the poor, the downtrodden, and the sinful. Since being an outcast doesn't negate one's humanity, Boyle asks readers to recognize that outcasts are worthy of respect and compassion—even if most people don't feel any kinship with them. Boyle lists dozens—even hundreds—of examples of supposedly worthless people who committed serious crimes, went to prison, but later went on to live happy lives structured around good, moral behavior. Boyle therefore opens his church's doors to anyone who'd like to attend, even gang members. This action offends and frightens many of Boyle's congregants. However, Boyle reminds these congregants of the strong Christian precedent for embracing outcasts, no matter how frightening.

Ultimately, the outcast's shunned status says more about society at large than about the outcast. Too often, people don't have the training or the courage to extend their kinship to strangers. As a result, they turn their backs on certain kinds of people, such as ex-convicts, who need their help. Boyle includes many anecdotes about people who say offhanded, offensive things about social outcasts. For example, he remembers a nurse who calls a murdered gang member a "monster." However, this anecdote also underscores Boyle's most important point: even if people sometimes cast others out, they have the *potential* to extend their kinship to everyone. The nurse in Boyle's story is immediately reprimanded by a second nurse, who reminds her coworker that this dead gang member has a mother and a family, and he deserves her respect. It is this second nurse who upholds Boyle's point about the universal capacity for kinship. Even if they treat certain kinds of people as outcasts, people instinctively want to be good and kind. By treating outcasts with kindness, Boyle hopes to change his society and set an example that the rest of Los Angeles will one day follow.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

TATTOOS

In Los Angeles, many gang members have elaborate tattoos that show their gang affiliation. The tattoos can't be removed, except with surgery, which evokes the permanent, lifelong allegiance that gangs demand. However, Father Gregory Boyle's nonprofit, Homeboy Industries, offers tattoo removal surgeries. Tattoos, then, symbolize the crimes that Boyle's associates have committed—crimes that supposedly render them unlovable and irredeemable. However, Boyle removing the tattoos of ex-gang members makes one of Boyle's most important points: no crime is so great that it can't be forgiven. Thus tattoo removal dovetails with Boyle's religious message: just as tattoos that were thought to be permanent can be removed, even the most serious crimes can be forgiven, and even the most hardened criminals are entitled to God's love.

THE PHOTOGRAPH

Father Gregory Boyle mentions a photograph that an ex-gang member, Richard, finds of himself. The photograph shows Richard as a happy-seeming kid at the age of ten. As Boyle writes, Richard's photograph of himself symbolizes his self-worth. Boyle believes that many gang members secretly (or not so secretly) hate themselves—they don't think they deserve to be loved or respected. Therefore, Richard's attachment to the photograph was based on seeing a memento of his previous happiness, however distant and small. It was a reminder that he used to respect himself. Recognizing that this photo means a lot to Richard, Boyle takes Richard to get the photograph enlarged. The act of enlarging Richard's photograph is symbolically an act of enhancing Richard's love and respect for himself—it's a manifestation of what Boyle tries to do with Homeboy Industries.

CALDO DE IGUANA

Father Gregory Boyle describes a visit to a Mexican prison during which he witnesses the prisoners working together to prepare a traditional Mexican stew called *caldo de iguana*. Though the prisoners have very little individually, they each bring an ingredient—sometimes the only

thing they have—to put in the stew. Together, the prisoners make a stew that is tasty and nourishing and everyone gets a bowl of it. Had the prisoners not shared their ingredients and worked together to make the stew, they would have been hungry, so the soup symbolizes the benefits of cooperation and compassion. The stew is the life-affirming result of a group of people with difficult lives realizing that, no matter what their divisions, they are more powerful if they recognize what connects them.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Free Press edition of *Tattoos of the Heart* published in 2011.

Introduction Quotes

Suddenly, the welcome mat was tentatively placed out front. A new sense of "church" had emerged, open and inclusive, replacing the hermetically sealed model that had kept the "good folks" in and the "bad folks" out.

Related Characters: Father Gregory Boyle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In the introduction to his memoir, Boyle describes his career as a priest in the Dolores Mission Church in Los Angeles between the 1980s and the 2000s. For well over twenty years, Boyle has remained committed to the principle that a good Christian church should welcome *everyone*—no matter how intimidating, frightening, or socially outcast. Boyle founded a school in his church, designed to educate young gang members who'd been expelled from school. He also started a nonprofit for ex-prisoners unable to find work—again, premised upon the idea that it's Christian to extend welcome to everyone.

Here, Boyle describes his model of openness and inclusiveness as "new," but he means this narrowly within the history of the church he took over in Dolores Mission, which used to not serve its community's neediest members. At other points in the book, Boyle argues that, overall, there is nothing radically new about what he's doing; in fact, his church's openness harkens back to the example set by Jesus Christ himself. Too often, he argues, modern Christian churches—like the one he took over—have treated the poor with indifference or even contempt. A good church congregation owes it to itself and to others to welcome social outcasts no matter who they are.

Homeboy Industries can only hire and help a finite number of gang members. Though thousands have found assistance, it remains a tiny drop in a pretty deep bucket. In the city of Los Angeles, Homeboy Industries has operated as a symbol as much as a place of concrete help. For more than twenty years, it has asked this city "What if we were to invest in gang members, rather than just seek to incarcerate our way out of this problem?"

Related Characters: Father Gregory Boyle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Boyle is proud of the work he's done in Los Angeles. For more than two decades, he's employed thousands of people who, in all probability, wouldn't have been able to find a job anywhere else. He's also imparted the residents of the Dolores Mission community with a sense of self-respect and compassion, which he considers the antidote to gang violence and despair. And yet Boyle is smart enough to recognize the truth: there's a clear limit to the quantitative *amount* of work his nonprofit, Homeboy Industries, is capable of doing. The company can't provide work for more than a couple thousand people at a time—a mere drop in the bucket compared to the total number of needy people in Los Angeles. However, Boyle suggests that the real contribution of his nonprofit has been a symbolic one. He's set an example, which he hopes other people will follow, of treating gang members and ex-convicts with compassion and respect instead of shunning them, as the rest of society tends to do. In this way, Boyle isn't asking that he be judged on the quantitative amount of good he's done, but rather on the way he's introduced a radical new paradigm for helping the poor and unfortunate.

"Damn, G," he shakes his head, "What's up with white people anyway?"
I was actually curious as to what was up with us.
"I don't know what *is* up with us?"
"I mean, damn," he says, "They always be using the word GREAT!"
"We do?"

Related Characters: Luis, Father Gregory Boyle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

In this amusing passage, Boyle interacts with a young man named Luis, whom Boyle has employed at Homeboy Industries. In many ways, Luis is typical of the kind of people Boyle hires: he's young, energetic, charismatic, but also has a criminal record, which makes it tough for him to get a job elsewhere. Here, Boyle and Luis playfully make fun of each other—Luis says that white people are always using the word "great," even when things are decidedly not great. Boyle, for his part, plays along with Luis's teasing. The passage is a good example of how Boyle interacts with his employees and students. He doesn't try to hide his differences (racial, cultural, or otherwise), nor does Luis try to hide his. Rather, Boyle and Luis respect one another for reasons that transcend culture or any kind of shared experience. As Boyle will explain in the later chapters, he and his employees get along for the simple reason that they feel a sense of kinship—boundless, unqualified compassion—rooted in their common humanity.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ Our image of who God is and what's on God's mind is more tiny than it is troubled. It trips more on our puny sense of God than over conflicting creedal statements or theological considerations.

Related Characters: Father Gregory Boyle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter One, Boyle explores one of the most basic tenets of Christianity, and of his philosophy of life: the existence of an all-powerful, loving God. The Christian God (to many denominations) is considered to be a being of boundless goodness. He loves humanity and all individual human beings, no matter how wicked or socially outcast. Accepting God's love, Boyle has found, can be a powerful experience. Many of the ex-convicts with whom Boyle works have experienced profound life changes after converting to Christianity: they accept they God loves them and, by the same token, that they're worthy of love. In this way, they come to respect themselves and show more respect for other people. However, as Boyle acknowledges here, many people find it difficult to believe that they're worthy of God's love. They're unable to comprehend a being of unlimited love. Boyle goes so far as to say that it's impossible to lead a truly virtuous life without accepting God's love. Only when one does so, Boyle believes, can one do good for other people.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ There is a longing in us all to be God-enthralled. So enthralled that to those hunkered down in their disgrace, in the shadow of death, we become transparent messengers of God's own tender mercy. We want to be seized by that same tenderness; we want to bear the largeness of God.

Related Characters: Father Gregory Boyle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Two, Boyle builds on some of the conclusions that he reached in Chapter One and explores how human beings interact with God. Some people, he argues, find it difficult to embrace God and accept his love. However, Boyle firmly believes that all human beings, by definition, have the capacity to love and be loved by God. They *want* to experience total love—God created them to feel this way.

Boyle allows his theological views to guide his nonprofit work. He doesn't judge ex-convicts or gang members because he believes in the innate capacity of all humanity to accept and give love. Therefore, he chooses to treat ex-convicts with unqualified kindness, in imitation of the love Jesus Christ gave his fellow men. While he frames his view of human nature in explicitly Christian terms (that all people want to serve God), it's also possible to see the same set of values in a secular context: that all people want to love and respect their community, for example, or that all people want to feel unconditional love.

❝ All throughout Scripture and history, the principal suffering of the poor is not that they can't pay their rent on time or that they are three dollars short of a package of Pampers. [...] The principal suffering of the poor is shame and disgrace. It is a toxic shame—a global sense of failure of the whole self.

Related Characters: Father Gregory Boyle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

In this somewhat controversial passage, Boyle advances his Christian view of poverty. Poverty, Boyle says upfront, is a horrible condition. It's utterly unfair that some people, through no fault of their own, have to worry about feeding their children and finding a place to sleep at night. But as horrible as the material effects of poverty are, Boyle argues, they pale in comparison with the psychological side of poverty. Fear, shame, and self-loathing are common among impoverished people, in part because they blame themselves for their misfortunes and in part because they haven't always had the luxury of growing up with people who give them unconditional love.

Not everyone would agree with Boyle's way of looking at poverty—in fact, one could argue that he puts the cart before the horse. Boyle seems to place more emphasis on repairing poor people's self-worth than on providing them with material support (although he does both). The best way to make impoverished people feel better about themselves, it could be argued, is to make them financially independent. In denying this practical way of looking at poverty, Boyle arguably doesn't do enough to change poverty. Or as Christopher Hitchens infamously said of Mother Teresa, one of Boyle's heroes, he's a friend of poverty, not the poor.

❝ Out of the wreck of our disfigured, misshapen selves, so darkened by shame and disgrace, indeed the Lord comes to us disguised as ourselves. And we don't grow into this—we just learn to pay better attention.

Related Characters: Father Gregory Boyle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

In this emotional section, Boyle sums up the life of Speedy, a young gang member who was inspired to rethink his life after a woman named Yolanda told him that she cared whether he lived or died. This frank, relatively simple expression of kindness is stunning for Speedy: tragically, he hasn't had many people in his life to tell him that they care about him. Yolanda's kind words are the perfect example of what Boyle has been arguing throughout the chapter: compassion can be a powerful force of change. In Speedy's case, Yolanda's compassion inspires him to leave the gang world, get a job, and start a family. Boyle sums up Speedy's life by noting that all people are struggling, whether they know it or not, to receive God's love. By accepting the love of Yolanda, Speedy was able to overcome his own self-hatred and accept God's love.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ To love the enemy and to find some spaciousness for the victimizer, as well as the victim, resembles more the expansive compassion of God. That's why you do it.

Related Characters: Father Gregory Boyle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

In this emotional passage, Boyle discusses the death of a young boy named Betito, who's accidentally killed in a gang shootout. Betito's story is all too common in the Dolores Mission: he's an innocent, happy kid who happens to be in a dangerous place at the wrong time. It would be easy for Boyle to be furious with Betito's killers. But instead, Boyle opts for something very different. He forgives Betito's killers for their horrible crime, recognizing that, even if they're wicked people, they also have the capacity to love and be loved by God. Loving one's enemy is a difficult moral act, and the fact that Boyle is capable of feeling love even for people who have killed his young friend shows how compassionate Boyle is, and how devoted he is to the Christian faith.

❝ "You will not clean this up. If there are people in our community who are disparaged and hated and left out because they are mojados (wetbacks) . . ." Then she poises herself on the edge of the couch, practically ready to leap to her feet. "Then we shall be proud to call ourselves a wetback church."

Related Characters: Petra Saldana (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Boyle recalls the day that he discovered the derogatory term "wetback" (a nasty way of referring to immigrants, particularly from Latin America) spray-painted on his church. Boyle's first instinct is to remove the offensive graffiti at once. But one of his congregants, a woman named Petra, says that they should keep it there—they should be proud to be a "wetback" church.

Boyle's decision to let the graffiti remain might seem odd. But there's a long Christian precedent for accepting one's enemies' insults without fighting back—going all the way back to Christ's plea that stricken people "turn the other cheek" in response to a blow. And there's also a lengthy rhetorical tradition surrounding the practice of accepting one's enemies' insults. In much the same way that "neocon," "Yankee," "Impressionist," and "Cockney" originated as insults but eventually became the accepted terms for those groups of people, Boyle chooses to accept the term "wetback" and allow it to remain on his church.

> This man sees all this and shakes his head, determined and disgusted, as if to say "tsk tsk."
> "You know," he says, "This used to be a church."
> I mount my high horse and say, "You know, most people around here think it's *finally* a church."

Related Characters: Father Gregory Boyle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Boyle spars with a congregant who believes that Boyle is making a horrible mistake by allowing people of all kinds, including criminals and gang members, to enter his church. The congregant seems to subscribe to a totally different idea of what a church should be—a closed-off place, meant only for "decent" people. Boyle proudly shoots back that the Dolores Mission Church has finally *become* a church—it's finally lived up to Christ's plea to embrace all human beings, no matter how socially outcast they might be. There's a strong Christian precedent for embracing outcasts and extending a welcoming hand to strangers. As the Dolores Mission pastor, Boyle lives up to this long, proud tradition.

> They refuse to receive communion. I beg them. They will not budge. I go to the congregation and invite them to receive communion. Not one person comes forward. I beg and plead, but no one steps up. I discover later, with the help of some Jesuit scholastics, that the Indians' sense of cultural disparagement and toxic shame was total. Since the time of the Conquista, when the Spaniards "converted" the Indians, they baptized them, but no roofs ever got ripped open. This was to be their place—outside of communion—forever.
> Maybe we call this the opposite of God.

Related Characters: Father Gregory Boyle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 80-81

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the few passages in the book in which Boyle talks about specific Christian rituals, rather than abstract Christian principles such as love and compassion (which many people, even non-Christians, will be likely to agree with). Boyle is reminiscing about being a priest in Bolivia years ago. He meets with Bolivian locals who refuse to take communion, one of the central practices of Catholicism. Boyle learns that Bolivian native people will not accept Christian rituals; therefore, Boyle concludes that these people are "outside" communion and in a sense, outside God altogether.

Not everyone would agree that people who refuse to engage in one Christian ritual are "outside God"—in fact, plenty of people would dispute that people who don't take communion aren't Christians. Furthermore, Boyle does not acknowledge that the indigenous Bolivians might have a complicated relationship with Catholicism, since the Spanish colonized their homes and converted their ancestors by force. Perhaps their decision not to take communion, then, is rooted in history, rather than "toxic shame." For the most part, Boyle presents Christianity in philosophical terms; here, however, is one of the only parts in the book when he reminds readers that he believes that one cannot lead a moral life without engaging in specific Christian rituals.

Chapter 4 Quotes

> I'm thinking, How does a sixteen-year-old get off thinking that she won't see eighteen? It is one of the explanations for teen pregnancies in the barrio. If you don't believe you will reach eighteen, then you accelerate the whole process, and you become a mother well before you're ready.

Related Characters: Father Gregory Boyle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the more controversial passages in *Tattoos on the Heart*. In it, Father Boyle makes an argument that many politicians have made over the years: young women living in impoverished parts of the country are deliberately having children that they know they can't support. In fact, Boyle suggests, many of these young women believe that they're going to die as a result of gang warfare, and want to "accelerate the whole process" before their lives end.

Boyle's argument seems a little illogical—it's hard to imagine someone coming to terms with their own death at the age of sixteen, and then plotting to give birth to a soon-to-be-orphaned child. Furthermore, Boyle's point is reminiscent of the old political practice of "blaming the victims"—in this case, implying that impoverished people are responsible for their poverty (since mothers consciously choose to raise children they know they can't support).

At many points in his book, Boyle argues that poverty is a horrible tragedy that happens *to* poor people—it's not something that poor people bring upon themselves. But here, Boyle seems to imply exactly the opposite. Perhaps this suggests Boyle's own confusion about the origins of poverty in Los Angeles. For someone who has lived near a housing project for more than two decades, he never writes about the root causes of poverty, such as systemic racism or accelerating economic inequality. As a result, Boyle sometimes falls into the trap of blaming the poor for being poor.

"You know, you'd really have to be an asshole not to continue on this path of success."

Related Characters: Mike Wallace (speaker), Andres

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Mike Wallace, the famous host of *60 Minutes*, interviews Father Boyle along with some of the people who work for Boyle's nonprofit, Homeboy Industries. Wallace—who many people found to be a smug, self-important person—interviews a teenager named Andres, with whom Boyle has worked closely. Wallace tells Andres that he'd have to be an "asshole" not to continue on the path of success that Boyle has created for Andres. In other words, Andres owes it to Boyle to succeed in life, given all the time and energy that Boyle has invested in Andres.

The remark says a great deal about what Wallace (and, Boyle implies, a lot of wealthy, powerful people) thinks about poverty and the poor. As Boyle says elsewhere in the chapter, too many people with power and money think of the poor as a "problem" to be fixed. Wallace's comment echoes this mentality, because it implies that the poor owe it to their benefactors to succeed. Boyle, by contrast, rejects this kind of thinking—and, in fact, rejects the concept of material success. Boyle provides his employees with a stable income and a job, but he believes that it's more important for his employees to acquire a sense of self-respect. Owing Boyle a "debt" of success isn't a part of this sense of self-respect—it's beside the point.

Chapter 5 Quotes

"Damn, G, seventy-five?" He shakes his head in disbelief, his voice a bare hush now. "I mean, damn . . . when's it gonna end?"
I reach down to Omar and go to shake his hand. We connect and I pull him to his feet. I hold his hand with both of mine and zero in on his eyes.
"Mijo, it will end," I say, "the minute . . . you decide."

Related Characters: Omar, Father Gregory Boyle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Father Boyle has an emotional exchange with a young man named Omar. Boyle has buried many people since the beginning of his tenure in the Dolores Mission, and most of these dead were killed in gang shootouts. Omar is shocked to learn that Boyle has buried seventy-five people, many of them children. When he asks when the violence will end, Boyle replies, "The minute ... you decide."

It's important to take Boyle's comments in the right context. Obviously, gang warfare isn't going to grind to a halt the moment Omar decides he wants it to stop. Boyle's point, rather, is that if the people in the Dolores community can work together and treat one another with respect, then gang violence will end. Boyle's entire career is dedicated to

the proposition that if people treat one another with kindness and respect, then evil will die out: gang members and ex-convicts will be inspired to reflect the kindness they feel from others. Of course, one could argue that Boyle's comments are overly idealistic and naïve. Perhaps Boyle is ignoring the material, root causes of poverty and crime in the Mission—a higher minimum wage, more job opportunities, and a less corrupt police force might have more of an effect on gang violence than Omar's kindness.

"Tonight, you taught me that no amount of my wanting you to have a life is the same as you wanting to have one. Now, I can help you get a life—I just can't give you the desire to want one. So, when you want a life, call me."
And I walk away more than a little discouraged. I contemplate a career change—crossing guard perhaps.
Some months later, Leo did call me.
"It's time already," he says. I knew exactly what that meant.

Related Characters: Leo, Father Gregory Boyle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

Father Boyle remembers a young man named Leo. One night, Boyle sees Leo "making a sale," implying that Leo is involved in selling drugs. For many people in the community, selling drugs is one of the few viable career opportunities. Boyle disapproves of the drug racket, but he understands why Leo feels that he has to get involved in it. As a result, he's surprisingly sympathetic toward Leo. He tells Leo that Leo needs to think about the kind of life he wants to have—and when he decides that he wants to lead a good, righteous life, Boyle will be waiting for him. Sure enough, Leo comes to Boyle a few months later, confident that he wants to change his life.

Tattoos on the Heart is full of stories like Leo's—stories of young men who make big changes in their lives and choose to embrace Christianity, morality, and a righteous life. Often, Boyle depicts people like Leo who are not yet ready to receive his message of love and compassion, but who ultimately come to see the wisdom of Boyle's church. It's interesting that Boyle doesn't mention any examples of young men who chose to embrace Christianity, but then regressed and turned back to a life of drugs and violence. Perhaps Boyle omits these stories to keep his book in a more optimistic register.

Chapter 6 Quotes

"Oh, come on now G, you know," he says, spinning his hand in a circular motion, "You're in my . . . jurisdiction."
I can't be entirely sure what Junior meant. Except for the fact that we all need to see that we are in each other's "jurisdictions," spheres of acceptance—only, all the time. And yet, there are lines that get drawn, and barriers erected, meant only to exclude.

Related Characters: Junior, Father Gregory Boyle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Father Boyle passes by a man named Junior, a local man who drinks heavily. Boyle greets Junior, and Junior tells Boyle that he loves Boyle, since Boyle is in his "jurisdiction." While Boyle doesn't know exactly what Junior means when he says this, he uses the concept of jurisdiction—his interpretation of this concept, anyway—throughout Chapter Six.

By "jurisdiction," Father Boyle means the people for whom we feel love and compassion and an accompanying sense of responsibility. Too often, Boyle argues, people's jurisdiction is very limited—in fact, it's usually limited to family members and friends. Boyle, by contrast, argues that people's jurisdiction should expand to include all human beings. People are created to love *everyone* unconditionally. The problem is that people allow their jurisdictions to be whittled down over the course of a lifetime by things like custom, tradition, and prejudice. As a priest and a community organizer, Boyle tries to expand people's sense of jurisdiction to include as many people as possible.

We seek to create loving communities of kinship precisely to counteract mounting lovelessness, racism, and the cultural disparagement that keeps us apart.

Related Characters: Father Gregory Boyle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

In this interesting section, Boyle expands on his definition of

jurisdiction from the previous section. Too often, people reserve their compassion for people who are like them—family members or friends or people who share their culture or interests. As a priest in the Dolores Mission area, Boyle has seen firsthand the ways that cultural and ethnic differences—in particular, racism—tear people apart. For the remainder of the chapter, Boyle discusses racism in the Mission (and also in prisons, where Boyle delivers Mass). Many of the gangs in Los Angeles are explicitly divided based in race—a clear example of how people choose to reserve their compassion for other people who are like them. Boyle tries to break down these barriers with universal, unconditional love and compassion.

Maybe there are eight of us or so when the meal finally gets served. Plenty to go around and just as tasty as it could be. Everyone brought his flavor to this forbidden pot of iguana stew and keeping anyone away and excluded was unthinkable to this band of prisoners. Alone, they didn't have much, but together, they had a potful of plenty.

Related Characters: Father Gregory Boyle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

In this symbolically-loaded passage, Boyle describes a visit to a Mexican prison. There, he witnesses a prisoner picking vegetables from the prison garden and then preparing the vegetables in a stew. Boyle is worried—he thinks that the prisoner will be punished for stealing. But then he realizes that the prisoner is preparing a meal for everyone. The fellow prisoners sit down and enjoy the stew—a Mexican dish called *caldo de iguana*—together.

Boyle notices that the prisoners each donate one ingredient to the stew: they put something into the pot, and as a result they're each rewarded a more delicious stew. For Boyle, this process is an elegant metaphor for the way that compassion works. People feel compassion for others, and in return they reap the benefits of receiving compassion from a big community of other people. To use another analogy that Boyle favors, compassion is a constant process of breathing in and breathing out—contributing something and getting something in return.

Chapter 7 Quotes

'THE LORD IS NOTHING I SHALL WANT."
There is enough strained obligation in what we think God asks of us that our mantra might as well be "The Lord is nothing I shall want." But the task at hand is only about delighting—with joy at the center. At ease. We can all relax.

Related Characters: Olivier, Father Gregory Boyle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Boyle recalls a young man named Olivier who misreads the Lord's Prayer. Instead of saying "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," Olivier says, "The lord is nothing I shall want." While this is a funny malapropism, Boyle finds a serious point in it. For many people, God is something undesirable—something too big and intimidating to be desired, or something that requires too much work to be worthwhile. In short, Boyle argues that many people are afraid of loving God and receiving his love.

Boyle's comments here, however, suggest that he sees the practice of worshipping God as joyful. To him, religion should not be an intimidating obligation, but rather a source of profound happiness and love. Part of Boyle's goal is to spread this way of thinking to others. Later in the chapter, Boyle cites the influential Vatican II Council of the 1960s, which reformed many Catholic practices and reemphasized the moral weight of joy in worshipping God. In all, Boyle upholds the conclusions of the Vatican II Council by celebrating the joy of loving God.

Chapter 8 Quotes

Are you, in the end, successful? Naturally, I find myself heartened by Mother Teresa's take: "We are not called to be successful, but faithful." This distinction is helpful for me as I barricade myself against the daily dread of setback.

Related Characters: Mother Teresa, Father Gregory Boyle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta was an influential Catholic missionary, and also an important role model for Father Boyle. Mother Teresa, much like Boyle himself, devoted her life to helping the unfortunate. She was criticized for not doing enough to better the poor materially—in effect, giving them spiritual comfort, but not addressing the root causes of their poverty. Mother Teresa summed up her philosophy by arguing that worldly success is ultimately less important than faith.

Boyle upholds Mother Teresa's ideas by emphasizing the spiritual side of impoverished people's lives, rather than prioritizing their literal, material success. While his efforts are admirable in many ways, one could make the same criticism of Boyle that others made of Mother Teresa—he doesn't do enough to help impoverished people become independent and financially stable, and instead chooses to give them psychological and spiritual support. However, to Boyle, God's love is the most important thing, and it can be given only spiritually, not materially.

> The Left was equally annoyed. They wanted to see the ten-point plan, the revolution in high gear, the toppling of sinful social structures. They were impatient with His brand of solidarity. They wanted to see Him taking the right stand on issues, not just standing in the right place.
> But Jesus just stood with the outcast. The Left screamed: "Don't just stand there, do something."

Related Characters: Father Gregory Boyle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Boyle defends his controversial interpretation of nonprofit work. Where other nonprofit organizers emphasize the importance of helping the poor in concrete, material ways, Boyle instead prioritizes treating the poor with compassion and helping them gain self-respect. Boyle cites no less an authority than Jesus Christ on this subject: Jesus, Boyle argues, associated with the poor and suffering, but didn't offer them a "ten-point plan" for financial independence. While Jesus *did* help the suffering in some material ways (he cured the sick, for example), for the most part he provided spiritual comfort for his peers.

Many of Boyle's critics argue that he hasn't done enough to fight poverty itself. But because Boyle believes in the importance of faith and salvation, and believes that these things are infinitely more valuable than any kind of material success could be, he chooses to emulate Jesus and treat his congregants with compassion and warmth.

> "As I saw this kid," she tells me, "I just kept thinking of what my friends might say if they were here with me. They'd say, 'Pray that he dies.'" But she just looked at this tiny kid, struggling to sidestep the fate of her sons, as the doctors work and scream ...WE'RE LOSING HIM. WE'RE LOSING HIM."

Related Characters: Soledad (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

In this moving passage, Boyle remembers a woman named Soledad who loses two of her children to gang violence. Soledad is, of course, shattered by these tragedies. But she doesn't allow her grief to poison her. Once, she's at the hospital and sees a small child from a rival gang—the same gang responsible for murdering her kids. Instead of wishing for revenge (i.e., wishing for the child to suffer) Soledad begins to weep, and feels a strong sense of compassion for the wounded child.

The passage is a good example of the kind of forgiveness that Boyle celebrates. While many people would find it acceptable for Soledad to wish suffering on this boy, she chooses to hold herself to a higher standard and interrupt the cycle of violence and revenge that took her own kids. Forgiving one's enemies can be incredibly difficult, but it's also a noble, moral act.

Chapter 9 Quotes

> Bandit hangs back. "Can I tell you something, dog?" I ask, standing in the parking lot. "I give you credit for the man you've chosen to become. I'm proud of you."
> "*Sabes qué*?" he says, eyes watering, "I'm proud of myself. All my life, people called me a lowlife, a *bueno para nada*. I guess I showed 'em."

Related Characters: Bandit, Father Gregory Boyle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Boyle describes a man named Bandit. Bandit used to be a gang member, but he begins to work for Homeboy Industries and take Boyle's advice to clean up his life. After a while, Bandit starts a family and moves away. He meets with Boyle years later and proudly tells Boyle that his child is about to start college.

Bandit is one of the many success stories that Boyle has witnessed during his time in the Dolores Mission. Bandit was a social outcast by almost any measure—he couldn't get a job, and people called him a "lowlife." With Boyle's encouragement, however, he's made something of his life: he's raised a daughter, whom he seems to love deeply. In short, Bandit is living proof of Boyle's firmly held conviction that all people—outcasts or not—are capable of feeling compassion and living joyful, fulfilling lives.

> "For the first time in the history of this country three gang members walked into the White House. We had dinner there . . . I told her the food tasted *nasty*."
> He pauses and gets still. And she cried.
> I get still myself.
> Well, *mijo*, whaddya 'spect? She just caught a glimpse of ya. She saw that you are somebody. She recognized you . . . as the shape of God's heart. Sometimes people cry when they see that.

Related Characters: Alex, Father Gregory Boyle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 204-205

Explanation and Analysis

Father Boyle is often invited to accept humanitarian awards and give speeches. But in the 2000s, he receives one of his most impressive invitations: Laura Bush, the First Lady of the United States, invites him to speak in the White House. Instead of treating the invitation as an opportunity to bask in his success, Boyle does what he always does: he invites some of his employees along and uses the trip as an opportunity to raise these employees' self-esteem.

Boyle brings two former gang members who've worked for Homeboy Industries to the White House. One of them, Alex, tells a flight attendant on the flight back to Los Angeles about walking into the White House, and the flight attendant is overcome with Alex's pride and decency. As Boyle explains to Alex, the flight attendant's reaction is perfectly understandable: she feels a strong sense of kinship with Alex. Put another way, she feels compassion for him. Alex has been through a lot, and the flight attendant loves and respects him for it. The instinctive, unconditional form of affection that the flight attendant appears to feel for Alex is precisely what Boyle aims to cultivate in his congregants and employees.

> But who wouldn't be proud to claim Chico as their own?
> His soul feeling its worth before its leaving.

The mortician's incredulity reminds me that kinship remains elusive. Its absence asserts that any effort to help someone like Chico just might be a waste of our collective time.

Related Characters: Father Gregory Boyle (speaker), Chico

Related Themes:

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

Father Boyle ends his memoir with a poignant example of the transience of life. A young man named Chico, who works for Boyle's nonprofit, is shot, presumably by rival gang members. Boyle is horrified by Chico's sudden death: Chico was a likeable young man who clearly wanted to live a good, moral life. But when Boyle speaks with the mortician, the mortician is shocked that Boyle considers Chico a "terrific kid."

The mortician's sudden, cynical reaction is the perfect example of what Boyle is trying to fight in the course of his work as a priest. Boyle wants to teach all people to love others unconditionally. While the mortician judges Chico—a man he didn't even know—based on Chico's status as a former gang member from the Dolores Mission, Boyle wants people to withhold judgment and treat each other with unlimited compassion. This sense of unlimited compassion, which Boyle often refers to as kinship, can be difficult to access, because people are so accustomed to looking down on other kinds of people. But Boyle wholeheartedly believes that kinship is worth fighting for.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION: DOLORES MISSION AND HOMEBOY INDUSTRIES

Beginning in 1984, Father Gregory Boyle works as associate pastor for Dolores Mission Church in Los Angeles. In 1986, he becomes the youngest pastor in the history of the church. Dolores Mission is located in Boyle Heights, and it's by far the poorest parish in the city. There are many gangs in the surrounding public housing projects.

Father Boyle is the author, narrator, and protagonist of the memoir. He's an important authority in the Dolores Mission community, historically one of the most violent, dangerous parts of Los Angeles.

Over his years at Dolores, Boyle witnesses the deaths of many "young people." In 1988, he buries a victim of gang violence, an eighteen-year-old named Danny. Since 1988, Boyle has buried 167 more people.

As a result of the Mission's long history of violence, many people die—some of them exceptionally young. Boyle, as the most important religious authority in the community, has the unenviable job of organizing funerals for these youths.

Boyle notices that many middle schoolers who get involved with gang violence are kicked out of school. But this makes the problem worse, since these youths spend their time around the public housing projects, participating in more crimes. So Boyle decides to open a school for children involved in gang violence, the Dolores Mission Alternative. Working at the school can be a nightmare: there are fights every day, and many teachers quit. But Boyle knows how important his school is: by welcoming gang members, Boyle is challenging the idea of the church as a place that keeps the "bad folks out."

Boyle is idealistic, but he can also be very practical. His proposal to start a school in the Dolores Mission church arose from a concrete problem: young people were getting kicked out of school and joining gangs as a result. By welcoming young gang members into the classroom, Boyle provides a calming influence in their lives, hopefully preventing them from continuing a life of crime.

Over time, more and more gang members attend Boyle's church, as well as his school. Boyle reasons that if they spend time in his church, at least they won't be committing crimes. Boyle's openness to gang members causes some parishioners to disagree with him. But Boyle insists that the church has a Christian duty to welcome anyone.

Boyle's decision to admit gang members to church is controversial, but it's grounded in Christianity's long history of extending welcome to social outcasts.

Also in 1988, Boyle realizes that gang members need jobs more than anything else. He organizes programs to give gang members jobs cleaning up neighborhoods, removing graffiti, and other simple tasks. The programs put significant financial strain on the parish, but Boyle manages to keep things running.

Again, Boyle recognizes some of the causes of gang violence and takes steps to address them by giving gang members stable employment. Notice that the jobs Boyle mentions encourage gang members to contribute to their communities, possibly making them less likely to commit crimes in the community in the future.

During the late '80s and '90s, Boyle organizes some important peace treaties between gangs. In retrospect, he sees that doing so gave the gangs "oxygen"—in other words, he legitimized them by agreeing to sit down and talk with them.

Boyle emboldens the Los Angeles gangs by sitting down to talk to them. This is similar to an argument that's often made for why the American government shouldn't negotiate with terrorists: doing so will only encourage them to commit violent crimes in the future. On the other hand, one could argue that Boyle accomplishes a lot of good in the short and the long term by negotiating a peace treaty.

Boyle is shocked by the Los Angeles riots of 1992. There are fires and angry mobs throughout the city, and after a few days, the National Guard enters the city in a vain attempt to restore order. But oddly, Boyle's neighborhood is one of the safest in the city for the duration of the riots. Boyle gives an interview in which he suggests that his neighborhood has been relatively untouched by the riots because the city's gangs have an incentive to keep the peace.

The Los Angeles riots were sparked by the acquittal of the police officers who beat Rodney King, a black man whom the officers pulled over on the highway. Boyle's comments about the Los Angeles riots were highly controversial at the time, in part because the suggested that gangs were better at preserving order than the LAPD. There's a lot of truth in Boyle's statement; during riots and blackouts, organized crime often plays an important stabilizing role. (For example, during the New York blackouts of 1977, the Mafia played a big role in preventing theft and rioting.)

After giving the interview, Boyle is contacted by a famous Hollywood agent named Ray Stark. Stark tells Boyle that he is looking for a way to make an impact on gang violence. Boyle suggests that Stark buy a nearby building and convert it into a meeting place for rival gang members. This building becomes the Homeboy Bakery. In the coming years, Boyle and Stark work together to found Homeboy Industries, a nonprofit that builds on Boyle's earlier efforts to employ gang members.

Stark's philanthropy helped Boyle realize some of his projects. He was able to expand on his initial plan to provide employment for gang members and found a full-fledged nonprofit for doing so. Stark's influence in the Los Angeles community also helped spark widespread interest in Boyle's anti-gang work.

In the '90s, Homeboy Industries grows and begins to offer more opportunities for gang members, including **tattoo** removal surgeries. By 2000, the nonprofit employs more than a thousand people, and moves to a bigger office. It also offers legal services, career counseling, and psychiatric care. To date, Homeboy Industries runs five businesses, including a bakery and café.

Homeboy Industries grew throughout the 1990s, partly because of the work of philanthropists like Ray Stark, partly because of the overall growth in California's economy during the decade, and partly because of its own success as an employer of ex-gang members eager to do work.

Boyle is proud of what he's accomplished with Homeboy Industries, but he's realistic enough to realize that it's just a drop in the bucket. There are tens of thousands of gang members in his city, only a tiny fraction of whom his nonprofit can help. Boyle thinks of his nonprofit as a tool that can help former gang members "crawl before they walk" and then "walk before they can run."

As we've already seen, Boyle is both an idealistic and a realist. He's exceptionally patient, meaning that he doesn't expect to change his employees' lives overnight. Rather, he subscribes to the belief that any improvement in the Dolores Mission community is better than no improvement at all.

In 1999, seven years after Homeboy Bakery opens its doors, it burns to the ground. Boyle's first reaction is to assume that gangs have destroyed the building. But the fire inspectors determine that the causes of the fire are natural. Many of the bakery employees weep when they see that the bakery has been destroyed. Ten years later, however, many of these former gang members are back and working at Homeboy Industries' new bakery.

Boyle's nonprofit experiences many setbacks, some of them due to unexpected natural causes like the fire. Initially, Boyle assumes that the gangs did it, which shows that—despite his compassion—he still doesn't trust the gangs. But notice that Boyle stresses that gang members didn't *burn down the bakery. Boyle is a respected figure in his community, even among gangs.*

At the original Homeboy Bakery, Boyle employs a man named Luis, a savvy former drug dealer. Luis renounces his gang allegiances after the birth of his daughter, and becomes a foreman for Homeboy Industries. Boyle quickly befriends Luis, and they develop a relationship in which Luis playfully teases Boyle for using the word "great" too much—something which he claims all white people do. As the months go on, Luis earns more money and supports his daughter.

This is one of the first passages in the book in which Boyle gives a sense for the way he interacts with former gang members. Notice that Boyle doesn't talk down to Luis: instead, Boyle and Luis playfully "rib" each other, and don't try to pretend that they have everything in common. This suggests one of Boyle's most important points: it's possible to feel unconditional love for another person, even if that person is different from you in almost every way.

Boyle remembers Luis when he speaks at Luis's funeral. Luis is murdered on an ordinary Wednesday afternoon while he's walking to his car—two gang members shoot him for no clear reason. At the funeral, Boyle delivers a sermon in which he argues that Luis was right to use his life to do good, even if his life came to a sudden, horrific end. He remembers the great English mystic Julian of Norwich, who argued that the purpose of life is to discover "God's goodness." By any measure, Luis discovered God's goodness before he died.

Boyle has a rough job: he makes wonderful friendships with the people at his nonprofit, only to watch in horror as those friendships are cut short by gang violence. Boyle finds strength, however, in his Christianity. He celebrates the lives of Luis and his other deceased friends, recognizing that Luis has honored God during his brief time on the earth.

CHAPTER 1: GOD, I GUESS

As a young man, Boyle has a memorable encounter with his good friend and spiritual director, Bill Cain. Bill's father has become very sick with cancer, and Bill spends all his time caring for his father. At night, Bill's father refuses to sleep—he just wants to look at his child while he's alive. Boyle often thinks that God is like Bill's father—he's always watching his children, loving them and supporting them.

Each chapter of the memoir takes the form of a lesson, supported with dozens of examples from Boyle's tenure as a priest. In this chapter, Boyle explores the idea that God loves humankind unconditionally, with a love far greater than any that human beings are capable of feeling.

In 1990, reporters come to Boyle's church to report on his work in the community. Mike Wallace, the famous newscaster, tells Boyle, "I cam here expecting monsters. But that's not what I found." Wallace realizes that many of the people in Boyle's classrooms are criminals, whom Boyle refuses to turn in to the police. The students trust Boyle to protect them, and when Wallace asks one student why this is, the student shrugs and says, "God … I guess." In this chapter, Boyle will talk about how God has inspired him to help others.

Mike Wallace was the host of 60 Minutes *on CBS for many years. The fact that he interviewed Boyle and Boyle's congregants is a sign that Boyle was becoming renowned for his nonprofit work in the 1990s. Boyle doesn't obscure the fact that he's motivated by his love for God: without his Christian faith to support him, he wouldn't be able to muster the strength to fight gang violence in Los Angeles.*

Boyle wholeheartedly believes that God is greater and more compassionate than any mortal could imagine. One night, Boyle gets a visit from one of his students, a young man named Willy, who asks Boyle for money and food. Boyle doesn't have much money, but he drives Willy to get a meal. He parks the car and walks to an ATM, telling Willy to pray in the meantime. When he returns to his car with a little cash, Boyle finds that Willy seems humbler. He's prayed to God—and God has told Willy that Willy is "*firme*," meaning that he is loved and respected.

This is one of many surprising passages in which one of Boyle's students experiences a sudden change in demeanor as a result of religious faith. God, Boyle suggests, has the power to make people feel loved. Especially for gang members, who aren't used to receiving unconditional love, this can be a tearful, overwhelming experience.

Boyle has been raised to believe in God's love and mercy. As a priest, he tries to fill his congregants with the same love of God he's felt his entire life. To accept that God is greater than any human being can be a humbling, but also an inspiring, experience.

One of the central tenets of Christianity is that God is all-powerful and all-loving, and Boyle argues that people become capable of greater moral acts when they recognize God's infinite love and mercy.

Boyle goes to visit a teenager named Rigo, who's living in a detention facility. Rigo's father is a drug addict, and he beat Rigo for years. Rigo loves his mother, however—he's grateful to her for visiting him in his detention center every Sunday. Boyle argues that God's love for humanity is even greater than Rigo's love for his mother. It's hard for people to understand that there's a being capable of total love.

For anyone—but especially for people who have been mistreated by their families and friends—it can be difficult to accept the fact of unconditional love. However, this realization can also inspire people to lead more moral, loving lives themselves.

One day, Boyle gets a call from a man named Cesar, whom he's known since Cesar was a child. Cesar has just gotten out of prison, and he's hoping that Boyle can help him out. Boyle agrees to pick up Cesar and help him. Cesar is a large, menacing man, but when Boyle picks him up, Cesar is overjoyed. Later on, Cesar admits to Boyle that he's always thought of Boyle as his father. Shyly, he asks Boyle if Boyle thinks of him as a son. Without hesitation, Boyle says that he does.

Boyle isn't just an employer or a community organizer. For many of the gang members with whom he works, he's a father-figure. He provides gang members with love and support that they never received from their own parents.

In 2004, Boyle reunites with a man named Scrappy. Boyle has known this man since 1984, when Scrappy was a teenager. In 1989, Boyle sees Scrappy while he's leading a funeral for one of Scrappy's friends. Scrappy gives Boyle an intense look, and then walks out. Three years later, Boyle breaks up a fight between Scrappy and other gang members. Scrappy pulls a gun on Boyle. Onlookers, who respect Boyle, yell for Scrappy to put away his gun and show some respect for Boyle.

Not all of Boyle's employees and associates treat him with respect. Some of them are pretty rude, or even actively threatening. One such person is Scrappy. However, notice that the majority of people in the crowd tell Scrappy to put his gun away, suggesting that the majority of the community respects Boyle and his moral cause.

When Boyle reunites with Scrappy in 2004, Scrappy is a calmer man. He sits down in Boyle's office and tells Boyle, "I've never disrespected you." He explains that he's spent the last twenty years trying to undo the things he did as a teenager. He begins to weep. Boyle hires Scrappy.

While Scrappy has disrespected Boyle (by pulling a gun on him), Boyle doesn't hold it against him. Inspired by God, Boyle chooses to forgive Scrappy for his past misdeeds and give him a chance at a fresh start.

Shortly after being ordained as a priest, Boyle works in Bolivia, tending to poor, uneducated congregants. His Spanish is atrocious, so he finds it difficult to communicate with them. He also preaches among the native Quechua Indians of Bolivia, many of whom have never seen a Christian priest before. During his time among the Quechua, Boyle crosses paths with an old Quechua man who calls Boyle "tatai," a word that connotes respect, love, and intimacy. God's love for humanity is greater than any that Boyle has ever experienced from another person. He often thinks about this in the course of his nonprofit work.

As a Jesuit priest, Boyle believes that he has an obligation to not only live a Christian life himself, but also to spread Christianity to other people. Boyle is a firm believer in the human race's potential for goodness—a potential that can be found in all cultures. However, he also seems to believe that true goodness can only arise from the belief in God: a supreme, infinitely good and moral being.

CHAPTER 2: DIS-GRACE

On Saturdays, Boyle goes to probation camps and delivers Mass. Then, he returns to his parish and officiates at baptisms, weddings, and other important events. One Saturday, during a brief moment of free time between his priestly duties, Boyle gets a visit from a woman named Carmen. Boyle knows Carmen—she's a heroin addict and prostitute. Carmen wants Boyle's help getting off of drugs. She breaks down and wails, "I am a disgrace."

In this chapter, Boyle discusses another aspect of his Christian faith: his belief that all people are worthy of love and respect. One of the most common problems that he encounters in the Mission is self-hatred: people simply don't believe that they're worthy of love. Boyle suggests that many people become gang members precisely because they hate themselves.

Boyle has read that people become addicted to drugs in part because of their strong sense of shame. The same could be said of "addiction" to gang life. People hate themselves, and don't believe that they're worthy of a good, happy life, so they turn to a life of danger and violence. But Boyle believes that, deep down, all people long to love God and feel God's love in return.

Boyle sees God, and Christianity, as the antidote to the "epidemic" of self-hatred in Los Angeles. When people develop some respect for themselves, they're more likely to treat other people with respect, too. This in turn means that the community overall is more likely to be at peace.

Beginning on the 4th of July, Boyle's neighborhood is transformed into a massive, two-week party space. There are parades, firecrackers, and dances. One day, Boyle angrily runs out of his office—someone has set off a firecracker outside. Boyle discovers that the culprit is a young man named Danny. However, Danny insists that he didn't set off the firecracker. Boyle nods and gives Danny five dollars to buy some food, saying, "If you tell me you didn't do it … that's all I need." Danny begins to weep from shame. Boyle believes that shame is an expression of "the absence of self-love." Over time, people can overcome their shame and embrace God.

In this situation, Boyle could state the obvious: Danny set off the firecracker. But instead, he opts for a more subtle solution: he tells Danny that he trusts him, thereby making Danny feel guilty. The point of this story is that all people—even seemingly irresponsible people like Danny—want to do the right thing. That's why Danny begins to cry here: he knows he's done wrong, and he's ashamed. Although shame itself isn't good, Boyle suggests that shame can lead to self-respect and love for God.

Boyle next discusses a man named Lula. He's currently in his early twenties, and has a son. Boyle has known Lula since Lula was ten years old. Lula is a "special ed" student, and he finds it hard to pay attention to anything for very long. Boyle remembers how, when Lula was in school, he showed Boyle his report card. Even though it was all F's, Lula was proud of himself for never missing a day of school. And at the church, Lula enjoys a supportive community that gives him the love he needs.

Lula is a typical member of the Dolores Mission congregation. He's had a rough life, but he sincerely wants to do better in the future. Boyle's duty, he believes, is to make people like Lula feel loved and supported, giving them every opportunity to make something of their lives.

The principle suffering of the poor, Boyle argues, isn't that they're poor—rather, it's that they're ashamed. Boyle has seen people's capacity for self-hatred, and he knows how toxic it can be.

At heart, Boyle argues, most of the problems in his community are caused by self-hatred. Gang members commit crimes because they hate themselves and don't think their own lives are worth protecting. By introducing some love and respect into the community, Boyle hopes to fight gang violence. Note, though, that this is a notably subjective and emotional analysis of a complicated social problem.

Each Sunday after Boyle gives Mass, he speaks privately with several of his congregants. One day, he speaks with a teenager who claims to be named Sniper. When Boyle presses him, the teenager admits that his real name is Napoleón "Napito" Gonzalez. Boyle thinks it's important that his congregants be honest about their names—"We all just want to be called by the name our mom uses when she's not pissed off at us." Boyle remembers teaching a sullen teenager who claimed his name was Cricket. But when Boyle found out that Cricket's real name was William, he found that Cricket opened up to him and was no longer so standoffish.

By using his congregants' real names, Boyle argues, he forges a strong emotional connection with them. Boyle believes that gang members use nicknames because they want to forget about their childhoods (they want to forget the names their mothers used to address them). Therefore, by using his congregants' real (or Christian) names, Boyle creates something like a parental relationship between himself and the congregants.

Boyle recalls a teenager named Speedy. Speedy would risk his life walking home a woman on whom he had a crush—an action that required him to walk on a rival gang's turf. One day, a woman named Yolanda, who's active in the parish, tells Speedy that it would break her heart if anything happened to him. Shortly afterwards, Speedy marries, moves away, and begins working in an oil refinery. He now has three great kids, and seems to be living a happy life. Years later, Speedy comes back to Los Angeles and takes Boyle to dinner. Speedy talks cheerfully about his family and his strong religious beliefs. As Boyle listens to Speedy speak about his children with pride, Boyle thinks about how Speedy escaped from the wreck of his "disfigured, misshapen self."

Yolanda's kind words are a perfect example of Boyle's point: all human beings want to be treated with love and respect, even if they pretend otherwise. Furthermore, love can be a life-changing force. The knowledge that somebody loves Speedy is—at least according to Boyle—enough to inspire speedy to lead a good, moral life and take care of his family. While this may seem far-fetched or overly idealistic, Boyle has thousands of similar stories, in which expressions of love—even something as simple as one sentence—are a powerful force for good.

CHAPTER 3: COMPASSION

In 1993, Boyle teaches a course on "Theological Issues in American Short Fiction" in Folsom Prison. At one point, he asks his students to define the word "compassion." To his surprise, nobody speaks up. But then, someone says, "Compassion … is … God." Boyle completely agrees with this definition: compassion is a total, unflinching love for other people, of the kind modeled by Jesus Christ during his time on the earth.

Boyle echoes the point he made in Chapter One: God is a being of boundless, unqualified compassion. However, Boyle elaborates on this point by discussing Christ's example. Christianity emphasizes that Jesus Christ was a man: he embodied and lived out *God's boundless compassion, acting as a model for other mortals.*

In the early days of Homeboy Industries, Boyle spends a lot of time with a twelve-year-old kid named Betito. Betito is smart and funny, and although he's raised speaking Spanish, he learns English quickly. One evening, Betito is playing with his cousin when suddenly gang members open fire at a rival group. A bullet hits him, and he dies in the hospital.

Boyle's long tenure in the Dolores Mission Church is filled with unspeakable tragedies like the death of Betito. The constant violence likely makes Boyle's commitment to boundless compassion more difficult and more important.

Boyle often thinks about Betito. He finds it hard not to hate the two men who opened fire that Sunday, leading directly to Betito's death. But having compassion for everyone, even sinners, is an important part of being a Christian. Part of having compassion means understanding what unfortunate people have to carry, "rather than stand[ing] in judgment at how they carry it."

In this passage, Boyle engages in one of the quintessential Christian moral acts: forgiveness. Even though Boyle is understandably furious over the death of Betito, he has the moral strength to recognize that Betito's killers are flawed human beings who are victims as well as victimizers. Instead of judging the two killers, Boyle recognizes their imperfections and forgives their sins.

Boyle remembers a teenager named Looney, who belongs to a local gang. Boyle meets with Looney just after Looney's gotten out of juvenile detention. Everyone in the parish is delighted with Looney's return—so much so that Looney can hardly believe it. Looney asks to speak to Boyle privately. He reveals that he got decent grades in prison, and Boyle congratulates him. Looney begins to weep, overcome with Boyle's praise. He admits, "I just want to have a life."

One of the common themes of Boyle's anecdotes is the desire to lead a good, happy life. Looney has lived a hard, miserable life, but he wants to "have a life." Boyle appeals to this desire in many gang members by giving them good, meaningful jobs through Homeboy Industries.

One reason sinners continue to sin is that they feel like outcasts. Jesus refused to treat sinners like outcasts—instead, he sat down and ate with them. In the same spirit, Boyle sits down and eats pizza with Looney, giving him the love he needs to thrive.

Boyle refuses to treat gang members and ex-convicts as inferior to him in any way. As he brought up at the beginning of this chapter, Boyle emulates the life of Jesus by treating all people with love and respect.

Dolores Church has been a sanctuary for undocumented immigrants since 1987. At various times, this has proven controversial. One day, Boyle finds that someone has spray-painted "Wetback Church" outside his building. His first instinct is to have the cruel message removed. But one of his parishioners, a woman named Petra Saldana, says, "You will not clean that up … We shall be proud to call ourselves a wetback church." Boyle realizes that Petra is right. Christ was proud to help outcasts, and he endured people's insults for doing so.

Boyle recognizes that it is better to accept other people's insults than to push back against them. (In a similar vein, Christ taught that people should "turn the other cheek"). This is actually a common rhetorical and political tactic: accepting an opponent's insult and using it against the opponent.

One day soon after, a former member of the community drives by the Dolores Church and chats with Boyle. He's a little surprised to see that the church is full of addicts, gang members, and other social outcasts. He mutters, "This used to be a church," to which Boyle replies, "It's *finally* a church." The beauty of compassion, Boyle concludes, lies in the fact that it allows people to come together with those who are unlike them.

Boyle is wholly committed to the Christian ideal of inclusiveness. Just as Jesus Christ associated with thieves, prostitutes and other social outcasts, Boyle opens the doors of his church to gang members, ex-convicts, and other people who've been cast out of Los Angeles society. Importantly, Boyle doesn't care if this decision alienates people who are prejudiced against the outcasts he welcomes.

Boyle meets a teenager named Anthony, whose parents are in prison and who sells drugs to support himself. Boyle takes in Anthony at his church, and learns that Anthony wants to be a mechanic. Boyle convinces Dennis, his mechanic friend, to hire Anthony and train him. Slowly, Anthony learns the trade, and also begins to gain confidence in himself.

Boyle doesn't just give his congregants emotional support; he provides them with a practical, material path to success.

Boyle delivers a talk at the University of Montana, along with two adults, Matteo and Julian, who spent much of their childhoods at his parish. Matteo and Julian speak movingly about their experiences growing up around Boyle, and Matteo tearfully tells Boyle, "I love you so fucking much," making Boyle weep. Afterwards, Matteo reads a story in the local paper, praising him for his moving speech. He admits that the story makes him feel like "somebody." "That's because you *are* somebody," Boyle says.

Unlike some humanitarians, Boyle doesn't treat his awards as an opportunity for self-aggrandizement. Instead, he uses award ceremonies as a further way of celebrating his employees and congregants. By bringing Matteo into the University of Montana, Boyle makes Matteo feel accepted and respected in a way that Matteo hasn't felt before.

Boyle officiated his first wedding in Bolivia. The couple was Quechua, and they refused to take communion, despite Boyle's encouragement. It occurs to Boyle that the Quechua have always turned down communion—in doing so, they've chosen to be "outside" of communion, and Christianity, forever. Perhaps the feeling of outsiderness is "the opposite of God."

Boyle believes that people should love one another—ideas that people from a wide range of religious backgrounds would be likely to support. However, Boyle also subscribes to a specific set of religious beliefs and rituals, such as Holy Communion (and, furthermore, he seems to believe that people who don't subscribe to these beliefs and rituals are against God). This makes Boyle's moral convictions harder for non-Christians (or Catholics) to accept.

Boyle goes on a three-state speaking tour with two of his former students, Memo and Miguel. The three men visit some of the poorest parts of the country in Pritchard, Alabama. On the visit, Memo is especially struck by the poverty he sees, and begins to weep. He confesses to Boyle, "I feel compassion for what other people suffer." With time, Boyle hopes, everyone will be able to feel this sense of compassion for people who are unlike them.

Memo's compassion for the people of Alabama reflects Boyle's own confidence in the power of compassion. Boyle has treated Memo with unconditional love, and now Memo has "inherited" this emotional capability from Boyle.

CHAPTER 4: WATER, OIL, FLAME

Over the years, Boyle has baptized thousands of people in Los Angeles. Sometimes, he'll run into adults whom he baptized twenty years ago. In 1996, he baptizes a teenager named George Martinez. George wants to be baptized immediately following his taking of the GED exam. Just before the baptism, George's brother Cisco is murdered in a gang fight. Boyle decides to proceed with the baptism. The ceremony is very emotional, with George weeping throughout. But it represents an important part of George's life—the moment in which he agrees to embrace God and find the courage to live a happy life.

Boyle is devastated by Cisco's death, but he also believes in the importance of baptizing George. This is another point in the memoir in which Boyle's belief in specific religious rituals—not just the general principles of love and compassion—may be challenging for some readers.

Boyle recalls a young man who worked for Homeboy Industries. He calls Boyle on New Year's Day and wishes him a happy New Year. Over the phone, Boyle can sense his pride—he has a family now, and he's even cooked a turkey dinner for them. Shortly afterwards, Boyle meets the man in person, and the man confesses, "I always suspected that there was something of goodness in me, but I just couldn't find it."

Notice that the young man in this anecdote describes the goodness inside him. One of Boyle's most important points is that all people have the potential *to be good—it's just that many of these people never realize their potential. Boyle's mission isn't exactly to teach people how to be good; rather, he reminds them of their own capacity for goodness.*

Boyle next recalls a teenager named Terry who used to come to the church. She would wear a short, red dress, and often asked Boyle to promise that he'd bury her in the dress. Boyle realizes that Terry thinks she's going to die soon. He encounters many young women who think they should have children at a young age, since they doubt they'll live long.

This is one of the most controversial, and telling, parts of the memoir. By arguing that impoverished women in the Mission are choosing to have children they can't support (and, in fact, won't be alive to support) Boyle seems to fall into the rhetoric of "blaming the victims"; in other words, suggesting that impoverished people are responsible for their own poverty.

Many of the gang members Boyle meets grew up without a father. And some of the youths Boyle meets who *did* have fathers in their lives had to endure horrible beatings and other forms of abuse.

Boyle is well aware of the absence of loving parenting in the Dolores Mission, and in many ways, he tries to provide a loving, parental role for his congregants, students, and employees.

The next person Boyle writes about is a young woman named Natalie Urritia, who comes to work for Homeboy Industries after a year in prison. She's a former gang member and a drug user, as well as a mother of two children. Boyle often wonders what Natalie would be like if she'd had a better childhood and more reliable parents. Once, Boyle has a dream about her—in the dream, Natalie is about to sing a song before a big crowd. The crowd, which thinks that Natalie is an awful singer, boos and jeers. But when Natalie opens her mouth, her voice is beautiful, and the crowd falls silent.

Two important things to notice here. First, Boyle sees Natalie as the victim of her troubled childhood (undercutting the implied point of the previous section). Second, Boyle's dream seems to symbolize Natalie's potential—and, perhaps, all people's potential—to be good. Even if society expects the worst from impoverished people of the Mission, Boyle knows that his congregants have goodness inside them.

Perhaps the most basic difference between Homeboy Industries and a Los Angeles gang, Boyle argues, is that gangs offer conditional love and support: if their members do something wrong, they can be punished or even killed. Homeboy Industries, on the other hand, offers its members unconditional love: Boyle will always help and look out for his congregants.

Boyle sees his church as a kinder, gentler alternative to gang violence and the culture that arises from it in the Dolores Mission. Boyle implies that the gangs' conditional love prevents members from feeling secure. Love and compassion are not real or supportive unless they are unconditional.

One day, Boyle is working when he notices that Danny, a young kid, has wandered into his office. Danny insists that Boyle stay still so that he can draw Boyle. The final image is hideously ugly—because, according to Danny, "Ya moved." This episode, Boyle writes, reveals how God works: God can see the beauty is every person, even if people "move" and therefore seem "less than perfect."

This is one of the odder parables in the memoir. People sometimes have a hard time recognizing the inherent good in other people. However, Boyle argues, God is capable of seeing the good in anyone—and, furthermore, people can learn to see the good in others by worshipping God. (There are several different people named "Danny," in this book—this is a different Danny than the one Boyle buries.)

Boyle meets a teenager named Andres. Andres has run away from home at the age of thirteen because his mother tortures him, holding him underwater and putting out cigarettes on his skin. Boyle offers Andres a home to ensure that he doesn't fall in with a gang. During Mike Wallace's visit to Homeboy Industries, Wallace tells Andres, "You'd really have to be an asshole not to continue on this path of success." Andres thinks that Wallace is calling him an asshole, and later admits to Boyle that he wanted to "toss up" (i.e., punch) Wallace. Boyle laughs and thinks, "Who among us hasn't wanted to 'toss up' Mike Wallace?" Andres later visits his mother with Boyle. When his mother sees him, she just says, "You are garbage." To Boyle's amazement, Andres forgives his mother.

Wallace's smug observation is a telling example of the way many people think of the poor. Wallace would seem to believe that Boyle's employees "owe" Boyle for all the time Boyle has invested in them. This suggests an overly mechanistic, dehumanizing view of the poor, as if the poor are just a problem that can be solved with enough time and money. In contrast to Wallace's point of view, Boyle doesn't think of his employees as investments: he loves and respects them with his whole being. Boyle tries to impart these emotions to his employees, and the fact that Andres finds the willpower to forgive his mother for abusing him suggests that Boyle has impressed upon Andres the importance of unconditional love.

Boyle has noticed that his students and congregants have a tendency to think of their flaws as proof of unworthiness. Gangsters in particularly have a habit of growing attached to their weaknesses. Boyle's mission is to draw these people's attention to their virtues and inherent goodness.

Boyle emphasizes the innate goodness of all his congregants. He thinks that anyone, criminal or not, is capable of leading a good life.

Boyle recalls a man named Fabian, who worked for Homeboy Industries for many years, and now has a job, a wife, and three children. When Fabian was 19, Boyle traveled to Washington, D.C. to give a speech; with him were Fabian and Felipe, "an enemy from [Fabian's] gang's worst rival." On the trip, Fabian and Felipe got along well and enjoyed watching movies together. Boyle remembers Fabian as a compassionate, incredibly friendly kid—he could make friends with absolutely anyone.

Boyle's story suggests that there are no uncrossable barriers between people. Even if the two people are sworn enemies—as Fabian and Felipe were during their time in rival gangs—friendship can bring them together.

In recent years, in part because of his cancer diagnosis, Boyle has started to receive a lot of awards for his two decades working with gang members. Whenever he gets an award, Boyle gives it to one of his former students or employees. On one occasion, Boyle chooses a teenager named Elias Montes to accept an award he receives from Loyola Marymount University. Elias is honored, but then—when Boyle informs him that he'll have to give a speech—horrified. Elias eventually gives the speech. He speaks plainly but sincerely, and when he falls silent, the audience "goes nuts."

Boyle seems to take keen pleasure in seeing his students and employees win acclaim from others. Many of the young people Boyle works with have never been cheered for. For Elias, the experience seems to be very inspiring—it reminds him that he's respected, supported, and loved.

Boyle recalls the day that Jason—a quiet, somewhat sullen former gang member—ran into his office. Jason was overjoyed to have gotten a job. Later, he tells Boyle why he spent so many years committing crimes and doing drugs: "I was so fuckin' angry all the time." But eventually, he found the courage to let his anger go forever. Soon after, Jason was gunned down by rival gang members, and Boyle buried him. Jason, Boyle thinks, was the light of the world.

Boyle is devastated by the death of Jason, but he also rejoices that Jason was able to turn his life around before his tragic murder. By comparing Jason with the light of the world—a symbol usually associated with Jesus Christ—Boyle emphasizes his point that people should emulate Jesus Christ, treating others with compassion.

CHAPTER 5: SLOW WORK

David is a teenaged kid who works for the Homeboy center. One day, he walks into Boyle's office and claims he knows someone who finds Boyle's public lectures "monotonous." David laughs and admits this isn't true—he just needs practice using bigger words.

David and Boyle's interaction is playful and full of gentle teasing.

Boyle knows a teenager named Omar. Omar, a former gang member, asks Boyle how many people he's buried altogether "because of gangbanging." At this point in Boyle's career, the answer is seventy-five. Omar is shocked. He whispers, "When's it gonna end?" Boyle replies, "It will end the minute … you decide." Change, Boyle concludes, awaits us.

Boyle believes that the best way to prevent gang violence is to convince people in the community to change their behavior and their outlook on life. If the people of the Dolores Mission develop more self-respect, and learn to treat each other more respectfully, then perhaps gang violence will go down. One could also argue that Boyle's philosophy doesn't address the concrete, economic causes of crime.

At a Mass held in prison for a dead gang member, Boyle meets a gang member named Grumpy. Boyle gives Grumpy his card and offers to remove Grumpy's **tattoos** for free when Grumpy gets out of jail. Grumpy sneers and says, "Why'd I get 'em if I'm just gonna take 'em off?" Boyle, unfazed, tells Grumpy to call him when he pulls his head out of his butt. A couple months later, Boyle runs into Grumpy as a basketball game, and Grumpy tells Boyle he's ready to remove his tattoos.

The passage establishes the importance of patience. Boyle knows that gang members will eventually ask him for help, even if they initially act tough, and claim they'll never remove their tattoos. Boyle is willing to be patient because he believes that all people have an innate desire to be good—sooner or later, he believes, they're likely to come around.

Waiting is a central part of Boyle's career, but he wasn't always good at it. He remembers a teenager named Leo, with whom he worked years ago. Boyle spends a lot of time trying to find job interviews for Leo. But one night, he witnesses Leo "making a sale." Leo notices Boyle watching, and later seems ashamed. Boyle points out that he's learned something: just because he wants Leo to have a certain kind of life won't make Leo want that life. But then, a couple months later, Leo calls Boyle and tells him he's ready for that peaceful, law-abiding life. He now works as a supervisor at an animal shelter.

Although he doesn't say so explicitly, Boyle strongly implies that he sees Leo involved in the sale of drugs. For many in impoverished parts of Los Angeles, selling drugs is one of the few reliable careers, despite the fact that it's illegal. However, Leo's life would seem to uphold Boyle's earlier point: if given enough time, people will realize that they want to live good, moral lives.

Boyle remembers the death of a gang member named Psycho. Thirty days after the death, Psycho's friends wanted to hold a small ceremony to mark his absence. Boyle attends the ceremony, and witnesses hardened gang members sobbing for their friend. One member, Carlos, tells Boyle that Psycho had a premonition of his own death. Carlos has organized the fundraisers and carwashes to pay for Psycho's funeral. Boyle praises him for "taking care of everything."

Notice that hardened gang members weep for Psycho at Psycho's funeral. Furthermore, Carlos makes it clear that he wants to do the right thing on his friend's behalf. In all, the passage emphasizes Boyle's point about how all human beings are capable of feeling a deep sense of compassion.

Some gang members get trapped in cycles of despair. But Boyle can remember one gang member, named Joey, who found a way to be hopeful. One day, Joey confesses to Boyle that he's started working at the children's theme restaurant Chuck E. Cheese. He's ashamed of taking the job, but he wants to provide for his son, who'll be born in two months.

Joey takes what many would consider an embarrassing job, but he does so for a moral, even noble, reason—supporting his family. Boyle applauds Joey for doing so.

Another former gang member, Bugsy, asks Boyle to buy him shoes. Boyle agrees, but tells Bugsy a story. In the story, an incarcerated gang member calls Homeboy Industries, and a former member of a rival gang answers the phone. The incarcerated gang member angrily asks the former gang member where he's from. Instead of yelling back, the former gang member passes the phone to his associate. Boyle asks Bugsy which character from the story behaved better—Bugsy immediately answers that the former gang member did, since he avoided a fight. Boyle agrees. But then he reminds Bugsy: the incarcerated gang member in the story was *Bugsy*. Bugsy winces and says, "I sorta thought that's where this story was goin'."

In this section, Boyle gets Bugsy to admit that he did something wrong without ever actually saying so himself. While the passage is pretty funny, it also communicates a serious point. Bugsy knows that he did wrong, and has no problem communicating this to Boyle. Instead of criticizing Bugsy for his behavior, Boyle waits for Bugsy to admit his own wrongdoing. In this way, Boyle gives Bugsy an opportunity to grow morally.

One day, Boyle gets some bad news: two former gang members who work with Homeboy Industries got into a turf conflict. Frightened, they fired their weapons, and in the ensuing gunfire, a bullet shattered some glass and cut the face of a mother who's working in Boyle's school. Boyle tracks down the two people responsible—their names are Bear and Johnny, and they look like guilty children. Boyle informs them that the woman is going to be okay. Then, furiously, he tells Johnny the full truth; the woman Johnny inadvertently injured was his own mother.

This is one of the most emotional passages in the book, and it's also a tragic example of how gang violence tears apart entire communities, and hurts everyone—even the gang members themselves. Notice that Boyle never criticizes Bear and Johnny explicitly; instead, he just tells them the truth, leaving them to stew in their own shame. In doing so, Boyle gives them the opportunity to recognize that they've done something wrong and vow to be better.

In the Bible, it says that love is patient and love is kind. Even though Boyle has heard these words recited thousands of times, he pays special attention one day at Mass when he hears a kid read them. The kid speaks so sincerely that Boyle can't help but believe him. Boyle has total faith in the power of love to transform people and therefore transform society.

Even though Boyle has been studying Christianity for his entire life, he continues to believe it with a fierce passion and to be surprised by the force and meaning of its teachings. Biblical teachings never bore him—rather, they continue to inspire him to lead a moral life.

Boyle recalls a former gang member named Pedro, who currently works for him as a case manager. Years before, Pedro began using drugs heavily. With Boyle's encouragement, he entered a rehab program. During his time in the program, his brother committed suicide. Pedro was devastated, but he didn't allow his pain to cause another cycle of addiction. Later on, Pedro confesses to Boyle that "Light is better than darkness"—his brother just never found the light.

Boyle recognizes that people in the Dolores Mission sometimes turn to drugs (or crime) because of their deep sense of despair. However, Boyle also knows that people have the willpower and the innate goodness to choose to "come into the light" and be good Christians.

CHAPTER 6: JURISDICTION

On his walk to work, Boyle passes by a middle-aged man named Junior, who drinks constantly. One day, Junior yells out, "Love you!" and then elaborates, "You're in my … jurisdiction." Boyle puzzles over what Junior means by this. Eventually, he decides that "there are lines that get drawn … meant only to exclude." Boyle tries to let as many people into his "jurisdiction" as possible—and this means loving them unconditionally.

In this chapter, Boyle will explore the concepts of jurisdiction and compassion in more detail. His basic point is that people have the capacity to love all other people—not just their friends and family.

Boyle recalls a gang member named Flaco who deals drugs and uses the drug PCP. Flaco gets very high and then staggers onto the 101 Freeway. He's hit by a car, but, miraculously, survives—albeit without his left arm. Boyle visits Flaco in the hospital. But he also overhears a rival gang saying, "I'm glad that shit happened to Flaco last night." Furiously, Boyle tells the gang members never to talk that way again.

Gang rivalries are an important barrier to the universal sense of compassion that Boyle describes. Blinded by their allegiance to their gang, the gang members in this passage forget their basic human decency and ridicule Flaco. They would never have done this had they perceived Flaco to be in their "jurisdiction."

Boyle knows two former gang members named Chepe and Richie who need to get out of town, although they haven't committed a crime of any kind. Boyle notes, "it's just a matter of time before *America's Most Wanted* comes calling." He decides to drive them up to Ridgecrest and Bakersfield for his lecture tour. One night, they stop at a restaurant. Richie and Chepe are intimidated by all the "rich white people" in the restaurant. It's their first time in a restaurant with menus and waiters. Afterwards, however, Richie and Chepe say they're impressed with how respectful and considerate their waitress was: she treated them like human beings.

Chepe and Richie are so accustomed to being treated like second-class citizens that they're moved when someone treats them respectfully—even if the interaction is as simple as a waitress taking their order. It's Boyle's belief that the absence of respect and compassion pushes people to join gangs and commit crimes. Therefore, the waitress's simple, respectful behavior could help keep Chepe and Richie on "the righteous path."

One Sunday, Boyle gives a Mass in prison, a place where racial boundaries are strong. At the Mass, however, the Latino and Caucasian prisoners sit together and seem to forget about their rivalries. At one point, a prisoner sings a solo. The singing is painfully bad, and Boyle has to bite his lip to stop himself from laughing. Then, everyone in the Mass—people of all different kinds—begin laughing together, forgetting about racial and cultural differences.

Boyle shows how something as simple as bad singing can bring together prisoners of completely different backgrounds. Humor can be a powerful force in breaking down barriers and, it's implied, building the sense of togetherness that Boyle celebrates. This also underscores how superficial racial differences are, even though they can seem impenetrable.

In 1993, Boyle spends three months visiting the prison island of Islas Maria, sometimes called "the Mexican Alcatraz." During this time, Boyle gives Mass, puts on an elaborate Passion Play, and gives advice to the prisoners. One day, a prisoner named Beto asks Boyle to meet him in the prison garden. There, Beto proceeds to pull carrots and eggplants from the garden. Boyle is frightened—if Beto is caught stealing food, he'll be horribly punished. But then, Beto takes the vegetables and leads Boyle to a new spot, where there's a pot waiting. Beto lights a fire under the pot and begins cooking a delicious Mexican dish, **caldo de iguana**. Other prisoners begin to gather, and Beto serves them some of the thick, tasty stew. Every prisoner brings something to flavor the stew—"alone, they didn't have much, but together, they had a potful of plenty."

Even though prison can be a hostile, divided place, Boyle shows how it can be a site of togetherness. For Boyle, the delicious stew that Beto prepares symbolizes the sense of compassion that unites all people together. Notice that everyone contributes something to the stew, and each prisoner is rewarded for his contribution with a bowl of the delicious result. This is an interesting metaphor for the way that compassion works: people show their love and respect for others and then reap the reward, which is an overall sense of acceptance and community.

Boyle hires two former members of rival gangs, Danny and Artie, to sell Homeboy Industries merchandise in Oakland. The two men don't speak to each other, frustrating Boyle. But one day, Danny and Artie spot an old couple walking by. Casually, Danny points out, "They're under the influence of Viagra." Danny and Artie collapse with laughter and begin high fiving each other. Whatever wall was between them has just come crashing down. The two men go on to become great friends.

Here is another good example of how comedy can break down barriers and bring people together (even if the people are sworn enemies). Each of these examples shows just how superficial the most seemingly-intractible differences are: something as simple as a crude joke can overcome even the most entrenched gulf between people.

An ex-gang member named "Clever" begins working at Boyle's Homeboy Silkscreen nonprofit. One day, however, Clever crosses paths with an old rival named Travieso. The two men clearly despise each other. Shortly afterwards, Travieso is attacked in a gang fight and put on life support. Clever is shaken by what's happened to his rival. He even offers to donate some of his own blood. To Boyle's amazement, he says, "He was not my enemy. He was my friend." This kind of selfless life, Boyle concludes, represents "God's own jurisdiction."

Throughout this chapter, Boyle has shown how many people, even the members of rival gangs, can love one another. The chapter ends with a particularly powerful example of this principle: Clever is willing to sacrifice some of his own health for the benefit of his supposed rival, Travieso.

CHAPTER 7: GLADNESS

One of the most basic things Boyle teaches is that life is only worth living if it's pleasurable. He remembers speaking on a Spanish talk radio show. Callers ask him about gang violence, and one caller is a man named Fili, who Boyle recognizes as one of his employees. Fili has called in to the radio show to tell Boyle that he's feeling sick and won't be able to make it to work that day. Afterwards, Boyle takes a moment to think about how he wouldn't trade his life for anyone else's.

In many ways, Boyle has a tough job. But he manages to find the joy in his intensive work as a priest and a community organizer. Here, for example, he finds the humor in one of his own employees calling in to a radio show to say that he's sick.

Boyle elaborates on Spider, a nineteen-year-old ex-gang member who works for Homeboy Industries. Spider has to take care of his wife and two children, and he always makes sure they have enough food. For Boyle, Spider's selfless delight in taking care of his family is like God's "unalloyed joy" in tending to mankind.

Building on the points he's made in earlier chapters, Boyle analogizes the love that Spider shows his family to the love that God shows to all humankind. God does not simply abstractly love people— he also actively takes care of them.

Boyle remembers his father, who died a month after being diagnosed with a brain tumor. In the hospital, he watched his father endure great pain, breathing in and out. It occurs to Boyle that life is a constant "breathing in" of joy and spirituality, accompanied by a constant "breathing out" of love for other people.

Boyle suggests that a righteous life is a kind of equilibrium, comparable to "breathing in" and "breathing out." People need to give love to other people and also receive other people's love in return. (This is roughly similar to the way that the prisoners in the previous chapter contributed ingredients to the stew and then received cups of stew in return.)

Boyle recalls an elderly woman named Lupe, who speaks up at a church meeting. Lupe has read about the image of the Virgin Mary appearing on the back of a tortilla, and thinks that God is sending an important sign to mortals. But another congregant, speaks up and says, "God is not like that." Boyle thinks that the second congregant is right. God wants us to live "within the withinness of God." Put another way, good Christians should delight in the beauty of the world and the elegance of Christian teachings, rather than simply waiting for overt signs from Heaven.

For Boyle, the only relevant "miracle" is the miracle of compassion. To live among the people of the Dolores Mission and receive their love is a constant source of wonder for Boyle. Explicit miracles (like the supposed appearance of an image of Mary) are beside the point.

Boyle knows a Homeboy Industries employee named Moreno. He's known Moreno since Moreno was a young child. As a teenager, Moreno was locked up, and later released on probation. Boyle began spending lots of time with Moreno, and learned that Moreno loved learning about biology. Today, Moreno works in the reception center of Homeboy Industries.

Boyle admires Moreno's energy—in particular, his interest in biology (however, the anecdote doesn't show how Moreno developed this interest over time). Boyle seems to present Moreno's interest in biology as an example of his overall enthusiasm and desire to lead a good life.

Boyle considers the ways that most Christians think about worshipping God. Some say that loving God is a difficult process. This is true, but some people use it as an excuse for *not* loving God wholeheartedly—they tell themselves that they just don't have the strength. Boyle remembers some of the hilarious "homie-propisms" that his students and employees have made while reading from the Bible. They mispronounce words, or substitute certain words for others. Once, a teenager named Olivier accidentally said, "The Lord is nothing I shall want." Humor aside, many people believe this—they think God is too intimidating to be loved. The beauty of Christianity is that it allows humble people to become great with God's love.

Boyle wholeheartedly believes that people can only lead truly moral lives when they recognize the majesty of God. However, he believes that many people refuse to accept God because they're frightened. They're intimidated by Christianity, or don't believe that they're worthy of God's love. However, Christianity teaches that everyone is worthy of being loved by God—and, furthermore, that people become majestic themselves when they accept God's love.

One day, Boyle notices two teenagers who work in his program, Mario and Frankie. He sees Frankie leaning in and smelling Mario's chest. Frankie is embarrassed, and tries to explain to Boyle that Mario just smells good. Boyle nods—"Delighting, he thinks, "is what occupies God, and God's hope is that we join in."

In this section, Boyle seems to witness some potentially homoerotic behavior between Mario and Frankie. Boyle doesn't discuss the homoerotic side of the encounter, and in fact draws a totally different lesson from it—we should delight in the world. In all, the passage is too brief for readers to be sure what's happening between Mario and Frankie.

Boyle returns from a lecture tour and meets with a former gang member named Marcos. Marcos explains that his son has just been born. Boyle is impressed with the sheer joy on Marcos's face. This joy, Boyle concludes, is what Christianity is all about—taking pleasure in the delights of life. He also remembers meeting a group of former gang members, and seeing a beautiful owl, a creature that none of the gang members have ever seen before. They're transfixed by the owl, "breathing it all in."

One of Boyle's central points in this chapter is that Christianity, far from being a solemn, somber ideology, is a joyous way of life. God loves humanity and wants humanity to be happy. To appreciate the beauty of the world is a joyful act and, potentially, a moral one, since it constitutes a way of loving and worshipping God.

Boyle goes with Israel and Tony, two employees of Homeboy Industries, to the annual Christ the King parish in Los Angeles. There, he speaks about gang violence, but first he gives Mass. Israel and Tony read part of the Mass, and Boyle is impressed with their knowledge of scripture. It makes him think about how the Vatican II Council Fathers changed the words of Catholic ceremony to reflect a new worldview. For example, the Council changed the words "Grief and anguish" to "joy and hope," thereby changing the way millions of Catholics would think about religion and therefore the world.

During the early 1960s, the leadership of the Vatican (the seat of the Catholic Church) held an influential council reforming Catholic ritual and belief. Vatican II is often regarded as having modernized Catholicism, removing some of the overly legalistic or ritualistic elements of the religion and emphasizing the importance of joy in religious faith. While some traditionalist Catholic groups continue to reject Vatican II, Vatican II upholds Boyle's own optimistic interpretation of Christianity, emphasizing the importance of joy.

One Saturday morning, gang members open fire on their rivals, brothers Rickie and Adam. In the gunfire, Rickie and Adam's little brother, Jacob, is murdered. Shortly after the funeral, Boyle hires Rickie and Adam to work with him. He invites them to one of his lectures in San Francisco. On the plane, the brothers worry about having to leave the airplane by parachute. But eventually they relax, and by the end of the flight, Rickie tells Adam, "I love doing this with you, brother."

The chapter ends with a particularly poignant example of the importance of joy. In the tragic aftermath of Jacob's death, Adam and Rickie find that they're still able to take pleasure in each other's company—they love being around each other. Confronted with grief, the two brothers continue to celebrate their shared bond, both as brothers and as people.

CHAPTER 8: SUCCESS

People love a good success story. But perhaps they should rethink their ideas of success and failure. As Mother Teresa said, "We are not called to be successful, but faithful."

Like many religious thinkers, Mother Teresa distinguished between worldly success and religious faith. The latter, Teresa argued, is much more important than the former, because it lasts forever.

Boyle has mentioned Scrappy in a previous chapter. Shortly after he began working for Homeboy Industries, he was gunned down. "Something," Boyle notes, "caught up with Scrappy." His death horrified his family and friends, of which he had many. Shortly afterwards, another graffiti worker was shot and killed. Another worker told Boyle, "I wish I had a magic wand to pass over your pain." Boyle wept harder than he'd ever wept in his life.

Boyle is moved to tears—not simply because of the deaths of his two employees, but because another worker conveys his sympathy for Boyle. For this man to express his compassion for Boyle is an overwhelming experience.

Boyle argues that many people believe that they have a duty to improve the lives of the poor. In a way, Boyle disagrees with this idea: he thinks that people should "cast their lot"—i.e., share their lives—with the poor. Boyle thinks of the way Jesus acted around the poor. He spent all his time with the unfortunate, but he didn't offer them a "ten-point plan" for improving their lives. One could say that Jesus annoyed both "conservatives and liberals" by associating with the unfortunate and yet not trying to improve them in any material way.

This is one of the most nuanced and controversial points in Boyle's book. Boyle argues that, while it's important to provide the poor with material support (and Boyle does—he gives them jobs), it's more important to treat them with unqualified compassion and humanity. One could argue that Boyle is ignoring the root causes of poverty when he makes this point—or, as the late Christopher Hitchens infamously argued of Mother Teresa, he's "a friend of poverty, not of the poor."

Boyle is driving out of his church one afternoon when he sees La Shady, a nineteen-year-old, with her baby daughter. La Shady's partner was murdered three months ago. She asks Boyle where he's going. Boyle is going to a peace treaty meeting between two gangs, including the one that murdered her partner. However, he just says he's going on an errand. Women are the minority in Los Angeles gangs—less than ten percent. However, many more women are "involved" with gangs in some way, since they date or marry gang members.

Boyle has the tact to hide the fact that he's meeting with gang members—doing so would only cause La Shady further grief. As a brief aside, Boyle notes that women are closely connected to gang violence and gang culture (and are deeply affected by it), even if they only make up a small fraction of literal gang membership.

La Shady wants Boyle to help her interpret a dream she had. In the dream, she walked into Boyle's church and saw Boyle standing by a baby's coffin. La Shady was terrified, but she found the courage to peer into the coffin. Before she could, however, a white dove flew out of it. Boyle, who's secretly puzzled about the dream, tells her that it means she should "give peace a chance" and embrace the Christian doctrine of forgiveness. Boyle asks, "How did the dream make you feel?" La Shady begins to weep: she admits she felt happy and calm when she saw the dove. Boyle assures her that God wants her to feel these good, positive emotions.

Notice that Boyle never offers an explicit interpretation of the dream. Instead, he emphasizes the strong, positive emotions that La Shady herself feels during the dream. In this way, Boyle seems to reiterate the point that he made in the previous chapter: God wants human beings to be happy. It's interesting to compare this passage with an earlier one about the Virgin Mary "tortilla apparition." In both cases, Boyle refuses to treat a thing (the dream, the tortilla) as an explicit sign from God. Instead, he emphasizes the more abstract, emotional way in which God communicates with people.

Boyle returns to his earlier point: God doesn't want people to worry about their success, unless this success reflects their fidelity to God. While Homeboy Industries tries to help its employees, it's not solely focused on making them financially independent—rather, it's trying to teach them to be good, loving people. Jesus understood that kinship—the feeling of togetherness and love—is much more important than success. And in fact, the desire for success can be a barrier to kinship.

Boyle reiterates his earlier point about the difference between success and faith. Boyle emphasizes faith—human beings' eternal relationship with God—rather than what he sees as the transient phenomenon of worldly success. Boyle acknowledges that a minimum amount of money and food is necessary to survive, but he doesn't seem to believe that material success is inherently valuable past this minimum point.

One day, Boyle sees a man named Manny, who used to live in the projects. This displeases Boyle—he doesn't want old residents coming back. Manny explains that he's here to buy some beer with his food stamps. Manny, Boyle recalls, was one of the twenty workers who built the original Homeboy child care center. A few hours after Boyle sees Manny, Manny is shot and killed. Boyle joins the vigil for Manny, and comforts his family. He recalls speaking to Manny a couple months before about how Manny wanted to be a good father, but didn't know how.

Manny's death is especially tragic because it comes before Manny gets to watch his child grow up. The abruptness with which life can come to an end in the Dolores Mission would seem to make it especially important that people live morally and rejoice in their lives.

With Boyle's encouragement, Manny's family agrees to donate Manny's organs to the medical authorities. One of the nurses who oversees the process mutters, "Who would want this monster's heart?" The other nurse turns and says, "He was nineteen years old. He belonged to somebody. Shame on you."

This is a disturbing example of the callousness that Boyle finds in Los Angeles society. People—in this case, the nurse—are ready to treat other people as "monsters." However, Boyle also makes it clear that there are other people, such as the second nurse, who respect others and want to do good.

Boyle remembers a former gang member named Ronnie who got his diploma and joined the marines to fight in Afghanistan. One night, Ronnie was walking through the projects when someone shot him six times. Ronnie's mother, Soledad, was inconsolable. Then, not too long after, one of Soledad's other children was murdered, too. Boyle reunites with Soledad two years after this horrific tragedy. She tells him, "I love the two kids that I have. I hurt for the two that are gone … The hurt wins."

Throughout the memoir, Boyle is sensitive to the experiences of women in the Mission. Although, by Boyle's own argument, women are less likely to be killed in gang conflicts, they're often left with greater torment—having to live on without their partners or children.

Shortly afterwards, Soledad goes to the hospital. There, she notices a kid from the gang that probably murdered two of her children. The kid is shot and clearly in a lot of pain—it's not clear if he's going to survive. Soledad begins to weep. The kid ends up surviving. You can't bring the dead back to life, Boyle concludes, "But you can stretch your arm across a gurney and forgive and heal."

Soldedad's behavior suggests that, even if she's tormented by the deaths of her children, she feels compassion for others, even the members of the gang that killed her children. Instead of craving revenge for her children's deaths, Soledad seems to want nothing so much as peace.

CHAPTER 9: KINSHIP

Mother Teresa once said that people have "forgotten that we belong to each other." The opposite of this process of forgetting, Boyle suggests, is kinship: recognizing our common humanity and our love for each other. Boyle has given away thousands of his personal cards to gang members about to go to jail. He always tells them the same thing—give him a call when they're out, and he'll remove their **tattoos** and give them a job.

In this chapter, Boyle arrives at one of his most important points. Kinship, as Boyle defines it, is a deep sense of connection and love for other people. Boyle tries to live his life according to the principle of kinship.

Boyle recalls a teenager named Louie. Louie has just gotten out of jail, and he's eager to have his **tattoos** removed. Louie claims that Boyle is the first person he's seen since leaving jail. Boyle smiles and says, "Louie … I have a feeling I was your second stop." They collapse in laughter—and out of nowhere, a sense of kinship arises between them.

For not the first time in the book, humor brings two very different people together. Boyle can be sarcastic, and sometimes he even makes fun of his employees. Nevertheless, he clearly loves them and cares about them.

A couple years ago, Boyle was diagnosed with leukemia. So far, he's survived cancer-free. He remembers a gang member calling him from jail and saying that Boyle shouldn't trust the doctors who've diagnosed him. Boyle likes to think of the calls he receives from prisoners "second opinions."

As of 2017, Boyle is still alive and working as a community organizer in the Mission. The fact that he continues to work hard even after his diagnosis emphasizes his commitment to helping other people.

Boyle reunites with a young man named Lencho who's just left prison. They first met when Lencho was only fourteen years old. Lencho is now twenty-four, and having a hard time finding a job. Boyle immediately offers Lencho work with Homeboy Industries. But he also wants to do something much more valuable: to show Lencho that he's respected and loved—in short, that he's not just a social outcast.

It's interesting that Boyle considers the abstract, emotional side of Homeboy Industries (making Lencho feel loved) more important than the practical side (getting him a job). But such a belief is consistent with Boyle's emphasis on faith and recognizing God's love.

Boyle recalls Richard, a young man who started working for Homeboy Industries at the age of nineteen. One day, Richard learns that Boyle's family members are "somebody"—in other words, they all have successful careers. Boyle realizes that Richard thinks of himself as nobody. Later, Richard tells Boyle about a **photograph** he's found of himself at the age of ten. Boyle realizes how important this photograph is to Richard: it gives him a sense of his own worth. Boyle takes Richard to a professional to enlarge the photograph as much as possible.

Richard seems not to have a high opinion of himself. But Boyle wants to magnify Richard's sense of his own worth—and in this sense, the process of enlarging the photograph symbolizes the kind of emotional therapy that Boyle excels at. Boyle teaches his employees and students how to love themselves, "enlarging" their self-worth.

Boyle grew up in a big house with lots of brothers and sisters. He and his siblings would listen to an old toy phonograph that would play a song with the lyric, "Long lay the world in sin and error pining—'til He appeared and the soul felt its worth." Boyle often thinks about this song, and what it suggests about the importance of kinship. People must remember "that we belong to one another."

The song suggests that the soul will exist in a state of sin until God helps the soul recognize its own worth. Put another way, one cannot be a good person until one recognizes one's own worth—an act that, according to Christianity, is only possible with the belief in God. But the song also suggests that people must treat each other *with respect, too—in doing so, they remind each other of their worth, and strengthen their relationship with God.*

Fifteen years ago, a man named Bandit comes to see Boyle. Bandit is a well-known thief in the gang world, but he tells Boyle that he's tired of his life. Boyle offers Bandit a job with Homeboy Industries. Fifteen years later, Bandit is running the warehouse and has a wife and three children. Tearfully, he asks Boyle to bless his daughter, who's about to go to college. He admits to Boyle that he's very proud of himself for making big changes in his life.

Bandit tires of his violent life in the gang world, and hungers for something more fulfilling—a wife and a family. It is Boyle's firm belief that all human beings, not just Bandit, fundamentally want to be happy, be loved, and love other people.

In 2005, the White House honors Homeboy Industries for its contributions to gang intervention. First Lady Laura Bush visits the facilities, and the visit goes very well: everyone is very respectful, and a little overwhelmed to be so close to the wife of the president. Boyle is invited to speak at a conference at Howard University in Washington, D.C., and Boyle accepts. Bush tells him that he should bring three of his employees with him. Boyle chooses three ex-gang members Alex, Charlie, and Felipe. Boyle has known all three of them for a very long time, and their stories are typical of the gang members that Boyle tries to help.

Laura Bush was the wife of George W. Bush, the president of the United States from 2001 to 2009. Laura Bush's invitation to Boyle is another sign that Boyle has attracted considerable renown for his nonprofit work. However, as he's done in the past, Boyle doesn't treat the invitation as an opportunity to bask in his own glory—rather, he uses it to honor and validate three of his employees.

Before the trip, Boyle takes Alex, Charlie, and Felipe to get suits for their visit to D.C. But then, Alex admits that he hasn't gotten permission from his parole officer to go to Washington, D.C. Boyle calls the parole officer and begs for Alex to be allowed to leave the state. The officer insists that Alex can only leave Los Angeles under "high control." Boyle reaches out to Laura Bush, and within a week, the parole officer decides to let Alex leave.

The section further emphasizes the influence that Boyle has gained over the last twenty years—now that he counts Laura Bush a friend, he has the power to negotiate with parole officers on behalf of his employees.

At the White House, Boyle and his three companions enjoy a lavish dinner, including caviar—a food none of the former gang members have even heard of. When they're on their flight back in Los Angeles, Alex tells the flight attendant that he made history—he and his friends were the first gang members ever invited into the White House. He adds that the food "tasted nasty." The flight attendant began to cry—a clear expression of her kinship, Boyle thinks.

Notice that Boyle barely describes the White House ceremony—more interesting to him is the flight back to Los Angeles, since it provides him with a better illustration of the principle of kinship. The immediate, intuitive bond between Alex and the flight attendant is the perfect example of kinship: Alex and the flight attendant don't know each other, but they're capable of feeling compassion for each other anyway.

In 1996, a gang member named Chico calls Boyle and asks for a job. Boyle meets Chico in person—Chico insists that he's interested in learning about computers. Boyle arranges for Chico to take classes and also work at the Homeboy Industries center. He warns Chico that if Chico begins associating with his old gang friends again, "I will fire your ass." Although Boyle doesn't hear from Chico for a couple days, he soon receives a fax from Chico saying, "I really love this job."

Boyle offers one final example drawn from his career as a community organizer. Chico is, in many ways, exemplary of the young people with whom Boyle works: he's a social outcast (in the sense that he has a criminal record and finds it hard to find a job), but he's very eager to succeed.

Shortly afterwards, Boyle learns that Chico has been shot. Boyle visits Chico in the hospital—Chico may be paralyzed for the rest of his life. A week later, his heart stops, and his life comes to an end. At the funeral, Boyle weeps—he's buried eight people in just three weeks. He murmurs, "That was a terrific kid." The mortician, who's also present, says, "He *was*?"

In this moving scene, Boyle clashes with a cold, callous mortician, who seems to find it impossible that someone with a criminal record could be "a terrific kid." The mortician's behavior suggests that many people find it difficult to feel compassion for people who are unlike them.

The mortician's reaction, Boyle thinks, reminds him that kinship can be hard for some people. But it's crucial that we teach ourselves to listen to "the voices from the margins" and respect people who are unlike us. This vision may take time to come true, but "we can surely wait for it."

Even if some people find it hard to feel compassion, they have the potential *to feel this sense of compassion. Boyle concludes by encouraging people to nurture and develop their sense of compassion—as Boyle himself has done over the course of his career.*

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