

Seasons of Love
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
NUCC Traditional
3 February 2019

*PRAY

Homeboy Industries is based in Los Angeles, California and was started by Father Gregory Boyle, a Catholic priest. Homeboy Industries serves high-risk, formerly gang-involved men and women with a continuum of free services and programs and operates several social enterprises that serve as job-training sites.

They offer 40 free classes per week for their trainees and community clients, meeting them where they are with development of life skills to wellness classes and high school equivalency test preparation courses and tutoring. They also offer a variety of support groups, with over 300 participants monthly; in fact, in 2017, they provided 3,670 therapy sessions. They also performed 11,834 tattoo removals, one of the foundations of their program, believing that helping former gang members remove the symbols of their former lives will help them establish new ones.

Father Boyle was giving a commencement address at Pepperdine University last May and he shared about being invited to his own alma mater, Gonzaga, one evening to give a talk to a large group. He was asked if he would bring two of the participants in his program with him; one of the people he brought was Mario.

Father Boyle describes Mario as the “most tattooed client” in Homeboy Industries' 30-year history. With tattoos on both arms, on his neck, forehead, cheeks and even his eyelids that say “The End” so that when he dies and is lying in his coffin there is no doubt.

But Father Boyle went on to say that as they made their way through the airport mothers would clutch their children and others would not make eye contact with Mario. Father Boyle found this fascinating because, he said, if you went to Homebody Industries on Monday and asked: "Who is the kindest, most gentle person who works here?" everyone, hands-down, would tell you "Mario." He sells baked goods at the counter in their café. No one would say "the Catholic priest who is known globally for his work with gang members and ex-offenders." No, it would be the man covered in tattoos that the people in the airport scurry away from.

That evening at Gonzaga University, Mario, Father Boyle and the other "homie" shared their stories in front of 1,000 people in the auditorium, and it was a marvelous evening. Then Father Boyle invited them both back up to the stage at the end of the evening for a time of question and answer.

A woman came to the microphone and said: "I have a question for Mario," first question out-of-the-gate. Mario clutched his microphone and anxiously awaited the question. The woman continued: "Well, you said you are a father with a son and a daughter who are about to enter their teenage years. What advice do you give them? What wisdom do you impart to them?"

Mario stood there almost dumbfounded and uncertain about what to say. He finally blurted out: "I just, I just tell them not to turn out like me." And the room was completely silent until the woman who asked the question says: "Why wouldn't you want your kids to turn out like you? You are loving, you are kind, you are gentle, and you are wise. I hope your kids turn out to be just like you!"

And then the most amazing thing happened. One thousand total strangers took to their feet, clapping and they would not stop as Mario held his head in his hands, crying, overwhelmed with emotion. You see, this room full of strangers had returned him to himself and they were returned to themselves.

I believe we are called to do the same. We are called to stand with the demonized, so that the demonizing will stop. And we stand with the disposable so that the day will come when we stop throwing people away. And we stand with those whose dignity has been denied and whose burdens are more than they can bear. And we stand with the poor, and the powerless, and the voiceless, and we make their voices heard.

I wonder if that wasn't the kind of love that Paul was writing about to the church in Corinth. Yes, we read this scripture, known best as the "love chapter", at many weddings and often I ask families if I can read it at their loved one's memorial service.

Increasingly, however, I am convinced that this is not an overly-sentimental, sappy sort of love. The love that Paul is talking about here is a love that has seasons and understandings, ups and downs, ebbs and flows. It is a love that is so bold and daring, gracious and caring, that it cannot not help but reach out to those who feel neglected and marginalized.

And so I invite you to come to this Table, receive bread for the journey, and then reach out to those around you, in love. So that no one will know hunger or want, including you. Amen.