

Last week we took a little side trip into the Gospel of John where the Gospel writer chose as the first story he told about Jesus' ministry the one in which Jesus turned water into wine. The author wanted us to get a joyful taste of the super abundance of God's grace that is revealed in Jesus, here, now.

Each Gospel writer tells the story of Jesus differently, and now we are back in Luke's Gospel which is the primary Gospel we'll be following this year. **Luke chooses the story you just heard to lead off with:** following Jesus' baptism and the infusion of power he received through God's Spirit of God, and then his time in the wilderness, we hear how Jesus, full of that same Spirit returns to the region of Galilee where he begins making quite an impression as he wanders from town to town. Luke quickly summarized this before slowing down to tell the story of Jesus' return to his home town: how on the Sabbath as was his custom Jesus went to the synagogue, and the local people, having heard of their local boy's growing fame invited him to do a little preaching.

They hand him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and Jesus chooses a specific passage to read:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Now in those days the preacher would sit down to preach which is what Jesus did. And every eye was on him waiting with baited breath to hear the sermon he would give.

And this is what he said:

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

That was it – the totality of his sermon. *(I know there are some of you who wouldn't mind if my sermons were this short, but unfortunately I'm not Jesus.)*

Our reading ends there, but next week we will hear how in the sermon 'talk back" that immediately commenced Jesus started arguing with the folks and they got mad enough to kill him.

But today let's just focus on this opening message.

Although unlike John's story of the wedding at Cana, **Luke's first story calls to mind the suffering of this world**, and yet it is similar in that at its essence it is a **message of joyful hope**.

This day the promise of the scripture is fulfilled – that the Spirit of God is working right now – this very day -- to heal this broken world – to come to the aid of the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed

It was a time when hope was hard to come by.

The Roman oppressors ruled the land.

But in this time of deep darkness Jesus **begins his ministry** with a **joyful note of hope**.

(Slide.)

I listened again this week to an **interview** of a wonderful Jesuit priest named **Father Greg Boyle** who has been working for forty years in a section of Los Angeles known for extreme gang violence. He has by his own count **buried nearly 200 young people** – some who died from overdoses but the majority through gang violence – young people he had come to know and love. Oftentimes they had been murdered by young people he had come to know and love.

He lives and works in **a setting that most of us would imagine to be unbearable**, full of poverty and oppression and rampant incarceration -- and yet one of the **striking** things about Greg Boyle is **how funny he is** – how **light-hearted** his spirit is in spite of the sorrow he has felt and the pain he has witnessed.

He is, in that sense, the **living embodiment** of the spirit of the story **John** started his Gospel with – that of a **wedding feast** with a superabundance of the very best tasting wine.

Father Boyle said that **when he first arrived** in the parish he serves, he set out to **try and be a peacemaker** between rival gangs. It was a noble goal, but eventually he came to the conclusion that to focus on peacemaking was **ultimately misguided** because it was based on the **wrong premise**. The violence between the gangs wasn't actually about **conflict**. If you come at it with the model of the Middle East or Northern Ireland you misunderstand what's going on.

It's not about conflict.

Rather, ***"It's about a lethal absence of hope. It's about kids who can't imagine a future for themselves. It's about kids who aren't seeking anything when they join a gang. It's about the fact that they're always fleeing something, always, without exception."***

So over time his ministry shifted its focus -- they started something called **"Homeboy Industries"** -- small businesses such as bakeries provided jobs for young people that allowed them to move out of gang life -- side by side with former enemies – former members of rival gangs.

They had these T-shirts made up that said,

"Nothing Stops a Bullet Like a Job."

He said **80%** of the solution for these young people was simply having a good job. The other **20%** was learning relational skills which involved healing the psychic wounds they carried, and so over time they added to their ministry therapists who provide therapy, individual and group, where these young people could begin talking about what they had been through in life and thereby release some of the pain.

In the interview Father Boyle mentions how recently he had been **studying deeply the Book of Acts**, the New Testament book **Luke** wrote after he finished his Gospel of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Acts tells the story of the early church, and just as in his Gospel, the Spirit of God is the primary active agent.

He noted how early on in Acts Luke describes the first Christian **community that was formed by the Holy Spirit**, highlighting the way the people loved one another – how nobody was in need. Nobody went hungry or homeless. And then Father Boyle described how as he was reading about the first church a phrase jumped off the page to him: ***"And awe came upon everyone."***

And then Father Boyle proceeded to tell a story.

Recently he had given a talk at a seminar for 600 social workers being trained to work with gangs. He said he brought two "homies" as he calls them. One was **Jose**, a tattooed man in his late 20s who works in their ministry with people suffering from substance abuse. Jose had been a **heroin addict** and a **gang member** and is now in recovery.

And so Jose gets up to address these 600 social workers and shares with them how he **didn't have a dad** when he was growing up. And then he says, *"You know, I guess you could say that my mom and me, we didn't get along so good. I guess I was*

six when she looked at me and she said, 'Why don't you just kill yourself? You're such a burden to me.'"

The whole audience gasped, and then Jose said, **"It's sounds way worser in Spanish,"** and then they laughed.

Then Jose said, "You know, I guess I was nine when my mom drove me down to the deepest part of Baja California, and she walked me up to an orphanage and she said, 'I found this kid.'

I was there 90 days until my grandmother could get out of her — where she had dumped me and she came and rescued me."

And then Jose tells the audience, **"My mom beat me every single day. In fact, I had to wear three T-shirts to school every day."** And then he kind of loses the battle with his own tears a little bit. And he says, "I wore three T-shirts well into my adult years because **I was ashamed of my wounds.** I didn't want anybody to see them. "

Father Boyle paused as he told this story and highlighted the fact that **Jose was never seeking anything when he turned to heroin or joined or gang.** He was **fleeing the pain** of the story he was telling.

But then Jose finished up his story to the 500 social workers this way:

"But now my wounds are my friends. I welcome my wounds. I run my fingers over my wounds."

And then he looks at this crowd, and he says,

"How can I help the wounded if I don't welcome my own wounds?"

Father Boyle said that when the audience heard him say this, the words of the book of Acts came to life: **"And awe came upon everyone."**

Father Boyle points out **how easy it is for folks like us to pass judgment** on people whose lives go off the rails like this.

But when you hear the stories like this -- stories of far greater pain than most of us have known -- and in particular when you hear a story in which somehow through the Spirit of God a person has found the courage and faith to turn towards the light and away from the darkness, you can't help but stand in awe.

In the interview, **Father Boyle was asked how it is that he can carry such a light spirit** while he works in the midst of such pain. He explains that it is because on a regular basis he experiences such awe.

Father Boyle said that **people have it wrong** when they look at him as being **some kind of great saint** who goes to these bad kids to share his goodness.

No, he says, it really is a **two way street**. In fact, he is certain he has **received far more than he has given**.

He tells another story about wandering through the projects late one night when he came upon this sixteen year old kid named **Mario** just sitting alone on his little stoop in front of the crummy old projects. Mario has a back story with a lot of similarity to that of Jose.

So Father Boyle greets him: *"Hey, how you doing?"* And he sits down next to him and Mario goes, "It's **funny that you should show up right now**." Father Boyle asks why and Mario says,

"Well, I was just sitting here praying and I said, 'God, show me a sign that you're as great as I think you are,' and then you showed up."

And Father Boyle described how awestruck he was – with the presence of a God of a superabundance of grace – a God so much

bigger than the little vindictive, rule obsessed gods we are inclined to imagine.

And Father Boyle said that one of the things he realized at that moment was that

"the day won't ever come when I am as holy as the people I'm called to serve, that the day won't ever come when I have more courage or am more noble or am closer to God than this 16-year-old gang member sitting alone on his porch."

In the interview Father Boyle was asked about his own experience ten years earlier of having been **diagnosed with leukemia** which led to a course of chemotherapy to become cancer free, and how the experience had affected him.

And he said that it was an experience that -- as uncomfortable and difficult as the experience of chemotherapy was -- he **wouldn't trade for the world.** That it created the opportunity for extraordinary intimacy and mutuality with the young people he worked with, allowing him to be the recipient of so much tenderness and concern on their part -- something he would always treasure.

During his illness Father Boyle received guidance from some early Christians way back in **the third century** who came to be known as the **"desert fathers and mothers"** who left the cities to go live a life of prayer out in the wilderness.

He said, **"Whenever the desert fathers and mothers would get absolutely despondent and didn't know how they were going to put one foot in front of the next,** they had this mantra they would turn to -- this single word they would repeat over and over to try and return them to themselves. And the mantra wasn't 'God' and the word wasn't 'Jesus.' The word was **'today.'**

In the distressing times of his cancer journey Father Boyle had found this prayer mantra helpful: "Today." Be present, here and now, to this moment, perhaps to the person standing in front of you.

I am struck that in that remarkably **short sermon Jesus** gave that day back in Nazareth, the opening word was, "**Today.**"

Today, in this moment, now, if our eyes are open, our hearts are open, **God's Spirit is present, setting the captives free**, releasing the oppressed. Returning us to ourselves.

One last story from the interview:

Father Boyle talked about having "a light grasp on life."

One day **Diane Keaton**, the Oscar winning actress was at the **Homegirl Café** – one of the businesses they started -- with somebody who came there regularly. They were waited on by **Glenda**, a "home girl" -- **a tattooed, felon, parolee** who is taking their order. She didn't know who Diane Keaton was. Diane Keaton asked Glenda for suggestions regarding what was good, and Glenda suggested a couple of dishes including the **platillos**, and Diane Keaton said, "That sounds good."

And suddenly as Glenda is looking at Diane Keaton it was as if something dawned on her: there was this moment when something dawned on Glenda as she looked at Diane Keaton.

"Wait a minute." Glenda says,

"I feel like I know you, like maybe we've met somewhere."

And Diane Keaton decides to sort of deflect it humbly and says, "Oh, gosh, I don't know. I suppose I have one of those faces, you know, that people think they've seen before." And then Glenda goes, "No. Now I know. We were locked up together."

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," read Jesus, quoting Isaiah, "because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim **release to the captives.**"*

We all captives together, and the Spirit of the Lord is at work setting us free.

We're really all in this together – **all of us are in various ways wounded** in ways that keep us from being the people God made us to be – unable to give our true selves away in love. And the beginning of the Spirit's healing of these wounds is finding the courage to bring them up into the light of day.

And all of us are oppressed in some form, and some of the oppression comes from outside of us, and some of it comes from inside of us – but God is at work leading us towards the glorious liberty of the children of God.

We are together the Body of Christ, anointed by the Spirit to come to that place where we can love our wounds and so they can be the source of compassion to the woundedness of others – all others.

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ²²On the contrary, **the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,**²³**and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect;** ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it