

## **Stories of Vocation: Tattoos on the Heart**

Father Gregory Boyle, SJ is a Roman Catholic priest, with a long history of ministries to the poor in Los Angeles, Bolivia and Mexico. In 1988, Fr. Greg created the "Jobs for a Future" program as a way to address the problems of gang violence in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles. This program would evolve into Homeboy Bakery, launched in 1992. Bringing rival gang members together to build a business that could provide job-training and an environment for personal growth, Homeboy Bakery proved that many gang members were eager to leave street life for a legitimate chance at a constructive future. In 2001, Fr. Greg launched Homeboy Industries which expanded the mission of the bakery enterprises including Homeboy Silkscreen, Homeboy/Homegirl Merchandise, Homegirl Cafe and Homeboy Maintenance. Now more than two decades old, Fr. Greg's ministry is recognized as the largest gang-intervention program in the United States and a model for such ministry around the world.

Father Boyle wrote about this experience in the book: "Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion" published in 2010. His work was the subject of the Academy Award winning 2012 documentary "G-Dog." Father Boyle's story is a powerful example of vocation in action, and in the long and often messy process of discerning vocation in community. In "Tattoos on the Heart" Father Boyle wrestles with life and death, with faith and lack of faith, with hope and despair—and through it all discerns his own vocation, even as he's creating the opportunities for former (and current) gang members to do the same.

### **Practice: Stories of Vocation: Tattoos on the Heart Discussion/Journaling**

Watch the G-Dog movie.

Gather weekly for a book discussion on Tattoos on the Heart and address the following questions. Or, read the book on your own and use the questions as prompt for reflection and journaling.

## ***Tattoos on the Heart* Questions for weekly discussion**

### **Introduction: Dolores Mission and Homeboy Ministries**

1. Begin with a discussion of the book's title, "Tattoos on the Heart." What does it mean or refer to? And what is the purpose of tattoo removal for the homies?
2. Does Father Boyle's approach to gang violence offer a realistic solution to a nationwide epidemic of poverty-violence-despair? Could it be (or has it been) replicated in other areas or other cities that you know of? Or is his project too idealistic to work on a national scale? What do you think?

3. How do you anticipate “vocation” being transformative in this book, both for Father Boyle and for the homies?

### **Chapter One: God, I Guess**

1. Talk about this chapter’s individual stories: Which are your favorites? Which stories make you want to weep? Which stories will stay with you?
2. In chapter one, Boyle writes, “This is a chapter on God, I guess. Truth be told, the whole book is. Not much in my life makes any sense outside of God. Certainly a place like Homeboy Industries is all folly and bad business unless the core of the endeavor seeks to imitate the kind of God one ought to believe in. In the end, I am helpless to explain why anyone would accompany those on the margins were it not for some anchored belief that the Ground of all Being thought this was a good idea” (21) Discuss this quote. What motivates human beings to do good or enact change in the world? What role does Christian faith or belief have in this motivation? How is this concept at work in your own life?
3. On page 35, Boyle writes that “God seems to be an unwilling participant in our efforts to pigeonhole Him.” In what ways have you found this to be true? What happens when we try to pigeonhole God?

### **Chapter Two: Dis-Grace**

1. Talk about this chapter’s individual stories: Which are your favorites? Which stories make you want to weep? Which stories will stay with you?
2. How would you define, or describe, the central lesson that Father Boyle passes on, both to the young people in gangs and to us, his readers?
3. How do inadequacy and shame function as barriers to giving and receiving love? Consider specifically Boyle’s story about Carmen in this chapter.
4. At the end of Chapter 2, Boyle writes, “Out of the wreck of our disfigured, misshapen selves, so darkened by shame and disgrace, indeed the Lord comes to us disguised as ourselves” (60). Why “ourselves” and not someone else to help us? In what ways does this chapter illustrate this point?

### **Chapter Three: Compassion**

1. Talk about this chapter’s individual stories: Which are your favorites? Which stories make you want to weep? Which stories will stay with you?
2. In this chapter, Boyle writes, “God is compassion, loving kindness. All we’re asked to do is to be in the world who God is” (62). Discuss this quote. How is this a challenging kind of calling? Does it make sense to you, and is it possible to actually be “who God is?”
3. Later Boyle writes, “Compassion isn’t just about feeling the pain of others; it’s about bringing

them in toward yourself” (75). What role does compassion play in our life’s vocation? Is it different for different people, or on some level are we all called to compassion as part of our vocation, no matter what we do or who we are?

4. How does Boyle interpret the Biblical parable about the paralyzed man being lowered through the roof of the house (75)? Boyle agrees that the story is about the healing power of Jesus. But he also sees "something more significant happening. They're ripping the roof off the place, and those outside are being let in" (75). In what way does the parable apply to the work of Homeboys?

#### **Chapter Four: Water, Oil, Flame**

1. Talk about this chapter’s individual stories: Which are your favorites? Which stories make you want to weep? Which stories will stay with you?
2. What has made Boyle so successful in reaching the gang members? Is it his message or his personal charisma? Perhaps it’s something else?
3. Discuss the role of faith in the transformation of the homies in Boyle’s stories.

#### **Chapter Five: Slow Work**

1. Talk about this chapter’s individual stories: Which are your favorites? Which stories make you want to weep? Which stories will stay with you?
2. How do you view yourself as a participant in doing God’s work? Are you an important and active participant? A pawn that God nudges here and there? A free agent completely separate from God’s work? How do you believe Father Boyle would answer this question?
3. In chapter five Boyle writes, “each time I find myself sitting with the pain that folks carry, I’m overwhelmed with my own inability to do much more than stand in awe, dumbstruck by the sheer size of the burden—more than I’ve ever been asked to carry” (127). Has this been your experience as well? What do you suppose our role is when we encounter other peoples’ pain?

#### **Chapter Six: Jurisdiction**

1. Talk about this chapter’s individual stories: Which are your favorites? Which stories make you want to weep? Which stories will stay with you?
2. What does the word “jurisdiction” mean? Why is it the title of this chapter?
3. Is there a time when you personally felt like Chepe and Richie, out of place somewhere you don’t feel like you belong? Who was your “Jesus in an apron” waitress in that situation?

4. Having read several chapters of this book, what do you believe is Greg Boyle's reason for writing the book as he did? Take note of how he's organized his chapters, of the way in which he tells stories about the homies. What messages might he be conveying to his readers through the book's form?

### **Chapter Seven: Gladness**

1. Talk about this chapter's individual stories: Which are your favorites? Which stories make you want to weep? Which stories will stay with you?
2. Despite all the death, loss and suffering that Boyle sees every day, he still admonishes his readers with this calling: "This way will not pass again, and so there is a duty to be mindful of that which delights and keeps joy at the center, distilled from all that happens to us in a day" (148). How do you see this evident in Boyle's life? Have you seen it evident in your own life?

### **Chapter Eight: Success**

1. Talk about this chapter's individual stories: Which are your favorites? Which stories make you want to weep? Which stories will stay with you?
2. Why is Boyle so hesitant to share "success stories" with people when they ask? How do we measure success in our world? Are there other ways we might measure success than we do? Consider this quote from Chapter eight as you discuss this question: "Success and failure, ultimately, have little to do with living the gospel. Jesus just stood with the outcasts until they were welcomed or until he was crucified—whichever came first" (172).

### **Chapter Nine: Kinship**

1. Talk about this chapter's individual stories: Which are your favorites? Which stories make you want to weep? Which stories will stay with you?
2. In chapter nine, Boyle writes, "At Homeboy Industries, we seek to tell each person this truth: they are exactly what God had in mind when God made them— and then we watch, from this privileged place, as people inhabit this truth. Nothing is the same again" (192). In what ways do we avoid telling the truth in our culture? How can we hurt someone more by NOT telling the truth? Do you agree with Boyle that this is the best way to care for those you are serving?
3. There is a general trend in our culture to do as little work as possible for the greatest gain. In what ways does Boyle's program value the ethic of "work?" How can good, hard work, in the form of a job, change a person?
4. Boyle challenges readers to "stand in awe at what the poor have to carry rather than stand in judgment at how they carry it." Is he successful in challenging you?