



Lexington Presbyterian Church

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Praise in Action

Ephesians 2:8-10 & Psalm 146
A sermon by William M. Klein

4 February 2018

I praise the Lord with my whole heart; with each breath I sing to my God. Happy are those who trust him and surrender their lives to his care. He creates us in his own image and fills us with his compassion, opening the eyes of the blind and lifting up those who have fallen. His justice shines from the depths, hidden but always present. Praise him for what you can fathom; for what you can't fathom, praise him. (Ps. 146 Stephen Mitchell's translation)¹

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – **9** not the result of works, so that no one may boast. **10** For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. (Eph. 2:8-10 NRSV)

1

If he does it once, he does it dozens of times. The psalmist reminds the people of Israel that praising God is central to their faith. In our responsive reading from Psalm 146 we read, "I praise the Lord with my whole heart; with each breath I sing to my God." Psalm 33 tells us that "praise befits the upright." The psalmist says in Psalm 34 that he will bless the Lord at all times...that praise shall continually be in his mouth.

Why, you may ask. Why praise the Lord? Well, because praise flows from gratitude. Praise is the grateful and unplanned response we make when we experience God's goodness, God's mercy, God's grace. Praise is what we do when we are paying attention to God at work around us and within us.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul tells us that our salvation is God's gift from start to finish...that God makes and saves us. Our response to God's grace is gratitude, faith, and praise.² We respond to God's gift by taking on the work God wants us to take on in this world. And how do we identify the work God has for us to do? By devoting ourselves to the sorts of labors that begin with gratitude and flow out of gratitude.

2

I want you to know I am all for praise. I agree with the psalmist...praising God is essential. I agree with the writers of the catechism, that our chief purpose is "to glorify God and enjoy God forever."³ I can sing the Doxology with gusto, praising "God from whom all blessings flow..."

What I am not on board with, though, is a type of praise that is all words and no action. I am not enthusiastic about praise words detached from action. From my reading of the scriptures, from nudges I take to be of the Holy Spirit, and from watching those people of faith I admire most...praise is active. Praising God entails words, to be sure... but it is rarely just words...and sometimes praise involves no words at all. This form of praise is what I want us to consider this morning.

I am convinced that when you pull out your compass or GPS in order to track down genuine praise you will find footprints and fingerprints. You will find good deeds being

done. You will find cups of cold water passing from one hand to another. You will find connections being made between and among people. You will find radical kinship materializing...relationships, connections, associations taking on tangible, bodily forms. You will find the difficult dynamics of forgiveness taking place.

When you track down genuine praise you will find hearts and bones and bonds becoming stronger in the broken places.⁴ You will find God. And you will hear and see people whose words and lives don't point to their own glory...but point beyond themselves to God.

3

Gregory Boyle is a 63-year old American Jesuit priest who lives in Los Angeles. He is the founder and director of *Homeboy Industries*.⁵ In April and May of 1992, Los Angeles was in the midst of what you may remember as the Rodney King riots.⁶ In the wake of the unrest, *Homeboy Bakery* began. Eventually the bakery grew into *Homeboy Industries*, which is the largest and most successful gang rehabilitation and re-entry program in the world. *Homeboy* offers an "exit ramp" for those people stuck in a cycle of violence and incarceration. The organization's holistic approach, with free services and programs, supports 10,000 men and women a year as they work to overcome their pasts, re-imagine their futures, and break the inter-generational cycles of gang violence.⁷

In 2010, Boyle came out with a book he called, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*...a book in which he reflects upon 20 years working with *Homeboy*. When I read that book several years ago I was awe-struck by the ways in which *Homeboy* meets profoundly troubled people where they are...and gives them an opportunity to not stay there. Boyle tells story after story of how opposing gang members help one another discover that they are not hopeless. Again and again I found that Boyle's observations easily apply to you and me even though our experience is so radically different.

This past November, Boyle's second book came out...this one he called, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*. This volume tells more stories of "homies" ...stories that are heart-breaking. To date he has buried 220 young human beings. And there are other stories in his book that are absolutely transcendent.

One day Boyle was interviewed on a syndicated Christian radio station by a woman who, having listened to Boyle's litany of things that take place every day at *Homeboy*...from tattoo removal to job training, case management to mental health counseling...asked, "But how much time do you spend each day at *Homeboy* praising God?"

Boyle was incredulous. He didn't know what to say. Finally he suggested that what they were doing all day at *Homeboy* was praising God.

She didn't seem to understand that praising God certainly includes words...but sometimes not the sort of words you might associate with praise...and sometimes it involves no words at all. In fact, God is praised most by what grateful praise in our hearts leads us to be and do.

Boyle believes what matters most to God is men and women being authentic disciples. He believes that somehow the highest praise of God is not about speaking disembodied words...which is to say words detached from actions. The highest praise of

God is the flesh and blood language of inclusion where barriers are dismantled, circles are widened, and no one is left outside. No one.⁸

Boyle has no doubt God likes to hear our praises. He believes God adores our praise-filled words. But far too often people think they have fulfilled their discipleship when they say, "Praise the Lord." Writer and pastor, Sarah Miles, says it is mighty easy to proclaim one's self "saved" and go back to sleep.⁹

Greg Boyle believes God is far more delighted when we live after the example of Jesus...which is to say, as we live astonishingly...as our praises get us out of the house to join God who is busily at work in the neighborhood, washing pots at the community table, packaging up unused food at the campus kitchen, swinging a hammer at habitat for humanity, visiting a shut-in in their home or in a nursing home, tutoring someone whose native tongue is not English...

God is praised through the work at *Homeboy Industries* when members of enemy gangs can look into each other's eyes and look beyond gang rivalries and see what God sees.¹⁰

God is praised when we let him fill us with the ability to stand **in awe** at the profound burdens some folks manage to carry...rather than standing **in judgment** at how they carry them.¹¹

Every gang member who applies to work at *Homeboy Industries* must be drug tested. Boyle asked one applicant if he would test clean if he went through the drug screening. The young man replied, "All I have in my system is hope. I will test positive for that."¹² That's the sort of praise God is interested in.

Rene was having a bad day. He was at the bus stop, eating a peach and stuck in a funk he couldn't shake. Some nearly paralyzing darkness was weighing heavy on Rene. Just as every day at the bus stop there was an elderly Japanese woman. He didn't know her...didn't know where she lived or where she went on the bus. She was bent over and appeared to be too old to work. Everyone always made sure she got a seat on the bus. This day as the old lady and Rene made their way onto the bus she turned and said to him, "I admire you." It was the first time the two had spoken.

"You do?" Rene asked. "Why?"

"You eat healthy," she replies. "Every morning you're here eating fruit. A banana. An apple. Today, a peach. You eat fruit...so I admire you."

After she got off the bus he sat there and replayed in his mind what she had said... and he realized his funk was gone. He jumped off the bus and found the Japanese woman. He got on one knee and looked her in the eye. "Thank you for bringing so much spirit into my day," he said. The woman smiled and touched Rene's arm, and moved on. Through his involvement at *Homeboy*, Rene realized every moment, it turns out, is an invitation to recognize our interconnectedness. And when we do, that's the sort of praise God is interested in.¹³

Boyle recalls a day when he and Marcos were opening up *Homeboy*. In walked Giovanni. Marcos and Giovanni were once serious gang rivals who shot at one another. The two shook hands. "I'm going to the bakery," Giovanni said. "You guys want something? You know, like a cup of coffee, a corsage, or something?" Marcos and Boyle looked at one another and mouthed the word "corsage." Giovanni made a small baked-

good gesture – “You know, a corsage. What do you call ‘em?” Boyle said, “A croissant?” “Yeah, you want one of those?” Boyle said no, but Marcos says yes. Giovanni made for the door... and Marcos shouted after him, “But I’m not going to the prom with you!”¹⁴ Boyle believes the playful friendship between these two former members of rival gangs is the sort of praise God is interested in.

One day Boyle saw a homie named Memo on the second floor of Homeboy grasping at his heart and walking with some trepidation. “Are you having a heart attack?” Boyle asked. Memo clutched his chest and said, “Low-key, yeah.” Before Boyle could call for help, Memo clarified. “Actually, I think I’m having the opposite of a heart attack. What’s the opposite of a heart attack?” he asked. Boyle had no idea. Memo said, “I’m feeling peaceful. Good. Happy. It’s not a heart attack, it’s a heart...at peace.”¹⁵ Knowing Memo’s troubled life, Boyle knows this attitude awakened in his through Homeboy is the sort of praise God is interested in.

4

The psalmist captures the incarnational nature of praise with the psalm we read earlier – Psalm 146. I want to share a translation of that psalm rendered by poet, translator, scholar, and anthologist...Stephen Mitchell.

*I praise the Lord with my whole heart; with each breath I sing to my God. Happy are those who trust him and surrender their lives to his care. He creates us in his own image and fills us with his compassion, opening the eyes of the blind and lifting up those who have fallen. His justice shines from the depths, hidden but always present. Praise him for what you can fathom; (even) for what you can't fathom, praise him.*¹⁶

Here, now, in this place, praise God with your hearts, your hands, and your voices.¹⁷ Praise the Lord when you walk through the doors in a few minutes, out into the streets of Lexington...into your homes, the schools, the shops and restaurants, the hospital, the nursing home...you name it. Let your grateful praise of God be full-bodied as you devote yourselves to the good deeds for which God designed you¹⁸...and thereby live the good life as God meant for you to live from the beginning.¹⁹ Amen.



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Endnotes:

¹ Mitchell, Stephen. 1993. A Book of Psalms: Selected & Adapted from the Hebrew. NY: HarperCollins Pub., 3.

² Peterson, Eugene H. 2002. The Message. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2127. Peterson’s rendering of the Ephesians passage.

³ The first question of the *Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechism*.

⁴ A familiar phrase from Ernest Hemingway’s novel *Farewell to Arms*.

⁵ Check out their website - www.homeboyindustries.org.

⁶ The riots stemmed from the acquittal of four white LA Police Department officers in the beating of black motorist Rodney King in 1991. The riots over the course of five days in the spring of 1992 left more than 50 people dead, and more than 2,000 injured.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greg_Boyle

⁸ Boyle, Gregory. 2017. Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship. NY: Simon & Schuster, 195-196.

⁹ Miles, Sara. 2007. Take This Bread. NY: Balantine Books. E-print edition, 97.

¹⁰ Boyle, 28.

¹¹ Boyle, 51.

¹² Boyle, 84.

¹³ Boyle, 179f.

¹⁴ Boyle, 193.

¹⁵ Boyle, 144.

¹⁶ Mitchell, 3.

¹⁷ From the first verse of the hymn, *Now Thank We All Our God*.

¹⁸ See Ephesians 2:10 – New English Bible.

¹⁹ See Ephesians 2:10 – Jerusalem Bible.