

Lessons On Kinship with Fr. Greg Boyle

By: Maria Murphy, Frontlines in America Student,
J.D. Candidate Class of 2022



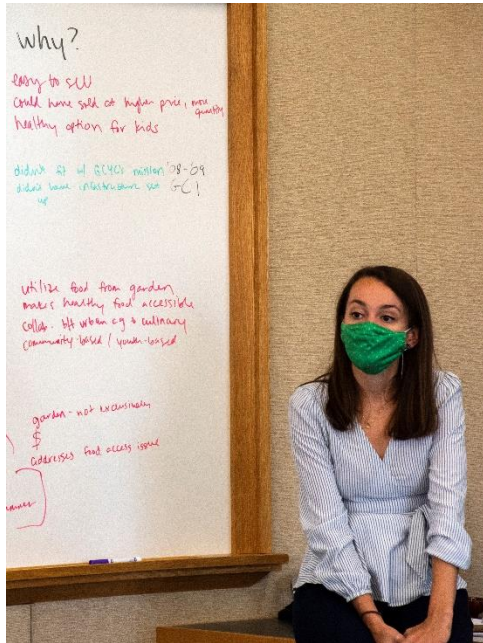
The way you see the world depends on where you stand. These words, made of hand-cut letters on bright construction paper, adorned the front wall of Room 113 and served as our classroom motto. I wanted my students to learn to think critically and with perspective. More than that, I wanted them to know that where they stood and who they stood with was a choice, one that would be consequential in shaping their worldview. This class motto was inspired by *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, a book I read in preparation for teaching. In it, Fr. Greg Boyle tells of his experience running Homeboy Industries, a gang intervention program in Los Angeles. Fr. Greg says, “The Beatitudes is not a spirituality, after all. It’s a geography. It tells us where to stand.”

Just as I want my students to do, I have tried to seek out the margins of society and stand there. After college, I did so by moving 1,300 miles south to teach middle schoolers in an under resourced neighborhood. I was there not just to teach them, but to join their community and walk alongside them. This is what Fr. Greg calls *kinship*. He explains, “Kinship—not serving the other, but being one with the other. Jesus was not ‘a man for others;’ he was one of them. There is a world of difference in that.” Through kinship, you honor the dignity of the poor and powerless and voiceless while opening your own eyes to their plight. Further, kinship decenters yourself and works against the temptation to view yourself as a savior. Fr. Greg had a lot to learn from his ‘homies,’ just as I did from my students. In standing with those at the margins, you open yourself up to true personal transformation.

When I decided to attend law school, I knew I wanted to continue to seek out the margins. I was thrilled to join the inaugural Frontlines in America course and to work with my team’s partner, the Gary Comer Youth Center on Chicago’s South Side. I was eager to collaborate with MBA and MGA students and to put my legal education into action in service of low-income communities and the common good. When I learned that Fr. Greg would be one of the class’s guest speakers, I knew that I was in the right place.

By the time we virtually met with Fr. Greg, our team was knee-deep in the problem-solving process, running financial analyses, developing value chains, and conducting interviews. Our conversation with Fr. Greg was fascinating. He told us stories of the various social enterprises used to fund the ministry at Homeboy and his participation on Governor Newsom’s Covid Task Force. Fr. Greg gave us advice on how to avoid privilege paralysis and how to enter the margins with humility. Most of all, our time with Fr. Greg was invaluable because it refocused us on our partners. He said, “Humility asks the poor *what do you need?* Hubris says *here is what you need.*” While our team had a lot to offer our partners, we had to really listen in

order to truly understand what they were asking us to do. One word stands out as I reflect on our conversation: *vicinity*. Fr. Greg shared that to effectively serve those on the margins, we must be in their vicinity. Of course, this was a challenge during a global health crisis which prevented us from travelling to visit our partners. How can we be in their vicinity when it is unsafe to do so?



Although we were unable to be in the physical vicinity of the Gary Comer Youth Center, we worked to be near our partners in relationship. This took some creativity and a lot of effort on both sides. In conducting interviews with our partners, we strived to build trust by allowing them to lead the conversation and listening as they articulated the challenges the Center was facing. We worked to include our partners in the problem-solving process, knowing that they had valuable perspectives that would be essential to developing a sustainable solution. Finally, we welcomed our partners to campus for interterm week, getting to know them on a personal level and investing substantial time in building our relationship.

The way you see the world depends on where you stand. Although sometimes reality prevents you from physically standing with the marginalized, you can still make sure that they are in your vicinity. As Fr. Greg prompted us: *Imagine a circle of compassion. Now, draw it wider and wider until it encompasses everyone.*