



Homily

First Sunday of Advent – Cycle A
December 3, 2017

“I am rehabilitated”

I am currently reading the newest book by Fr. Greg Boyle, SJ – *Barking at the Choir* – which is a compilation of stories and other talks he’s given about life with the men and women who are served at Homeboy Industries, a gang rehabilitation and re-entry program in Los Angeles. In the book, Fr. Greg relates a tale told him by one of his “homies.”

The homie in question was riding public transportation and seated next to him was a man with a new, smart phone. Apparently, it was the newest and most sought-after version and the thought ran through the homie’s mind that, in his old life, he would wait for the next stop, grab the phone from the man, and run off the bus or train – whichever the conveyance was. But he didn’t. Which is what prompted him to announce to Fr Greg that he was, in fact, “a rehabilitated gang member.”

What made the story more poignant, the man saw the interest the homie had in the phone and simply handed the device to him to inspect. The homie was astonished and, after looking at the phone, handed it back to the other man and told him to be careful to whom he hands his phone; not everyone would have handed it back.

This story, to many, if not all of us, should be a happy one. It is full of the good stuff we like to hear about, or watch on tv, at this time of year: mean Mr. Scrooge has a huge change of heart and saves Tiny Tim, etc. etc. And, if we pause to reflect more closely on it, we can find ourselves a bit distant from it because, for most of us, we are not in the role of the homie who wants the phone, but we are the other person who has the phone.

No matter what it is which presents itself as a decision in our lives, it means the same. Do we steal the phone, or just admire it? Do we tell the cashier they gave us too much change or just keep it? Do we walk past the homeless person asking for a dollar or keep walking and ignoring? When Jesus presents himself to us, are we asleep or are we awake?

Quite simply, the homie was awake when Jesus appeared, and he chose to follow. He was not aware Jesus would show up in that particular time or place, but he was, as the Gospel story says, watchful and alert. And that is our duty, to be watchful and alert to the times when Jesus enters our lives and is present.

We hear the stories told us in the Book of Revelation, and we think Jesus will come riding on clouds surrounded by the hordes of angels and with great fanfare. Maybe. But, I think it is more realistic – after all, the Apocalypse of John was a vision, not a documentary – Jesus just shows up at times and places of his choosing and checks in to see if we are paying attention.

Jesus asks us to do only one thing: follow him. Scan the gospel accounts and you'll encounter a person who only wants us to live the life he lived. In fact, he only says, "follow me." Not worship me, not adore me. Others in our tradition tell us to do this, but Jesus isn't much for the fanfare or adoration; he just wants us along for the ride. If we aren't ready, watchful and alert, we miss the opportunities.

This Season of Advent gives us the opportunity to clean house, sweep out the old and prepare for the new. Certainly, with the coming of Spring, life is reborn, and the world seems newer and fresh. During Advent, we sweep out the clutter inside, in our spirit, to prepare the way for the Lord. Our theme for this entire year will be to be a voice in the wilderness, to prepare a way for the Lord and make straight his paths.

This isn't a physical place. Jesus will return, but returns to us in Spirit. There is no physical dwelling of the Spirit except within us. And, it's not a matter of finding a great plastic surgeon to do a remodel here and there; it's not the physical body in which Jesus will reside, it is our spiritual body which Jesus calls home. We prepare this place for Jesus to come and take up residence.

We are only asked to be vigilant; to watch and find those times when Jesus presents himself to us and to follow. Will we always see him? No. Probably not. Should we despair? Should we give up on ourselves when we find we've missed the opportunity? Absolutely not. Why would we? God hasn't given up on us.

We hear in the first reading from Isaiah, "Yet, O LORD, you are our father; we are the clay and you the potter: we are all the work of your hands." Though we might stray and sin and do all manner of things which God finds abhorrent, we still find him waiting for us. Isaiah says, "No ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen, any God but you doing such deeds for those who wait for him." God never gives up on us, even when we miss the opportunity to follow.

St Paul tells we cannot get away from God and God's good graces. "God is faithful [to us], and by him you were called to fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." We are called to be in fellowship with Jesus. No matter what we do; no matter what signs we miss; no matter how far astray we wander. It is reassuring how wonderful we are found to be in God's eyes. It should comfort us, in our times of fear and uncertainty, knowing God is to be found by just looking.

Again, we are to be watchful and alert. The signs of God in our lives are not fleeting blips which disappear if we miss them; they remain. All we need do is turn around and grab them. But we concoct such stories in our minds which all position God as a stern task master and God's love to be unattainable at the first misstep. The seemingly straight paths toward God and salvation begin to twist and turn as we continue to believe God is angry and displeased with us, and we aren't worthy of God's love.

The challenge of Advent is to make straight these paths. The first step is to understand God loves you no matter what. It really is that simple. Whether we know it or not, we are called to fellowship with Jesus and all we need do is answer the call. God will not abandon us; he can't. We are the clay and he is the potter; we are all the work of his hands.

For the homies in Fr Greg's book, every day is Advent; every day there is an opportunity to make things new and fresh; to prepare the way of the Lord within themselves. The same is true for us: every day is Advent. It doesn't stop at 11:59pm on December 25. It continues throughout the year and we have 365 opportunities to make straight the paths which we have twisted and turned and made unnecessarily complicated to return to God.

Our theme for the year is, "Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way. A voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'" John the Baptist prepared the world for the coming of the human Jesus, the Word made flesh. This Advent, we are the voice of one crying out in the desert of our lives; we will prepare the way of the Lord within us and we will make straight his paths.

We will remain watchful and alert for those times, every day, when Jesus appears and asks us to follow. When we choose to follow and grow closer, then we too can sit down with our friends, our family, and our God and proudly announce, "I am rehabilitated."