



Move Toward God

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church, November 10, 2019

"Go": Jonah 3 and Luke 10, "The Good Samaritan"

There is a Jesuit priest named Father Gregory Boyle who has lived and done ministry in South Central Los Angeles for more than thirty years. When he started his ministry there, his neighborhood had the highest concentration of gang-related activity in the country. After a while Father Boyle founded an organization called Homeboy Industries, which seeks to help formerly incarcerated men and women get job training, housing assistance, tattoo removal, and whatever other support they need. He says that they work with the people no one else wants to work with. Why does he do this?

Father Gregory wrote a book about his experience with these youths called *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*. In it he describes his endless efforts literally to save their lives, although he has had to do hundreds of funerals for teenage gang members killed with gun violence. He talks about what it takes to stay in this ministry after many years. In the end, what matters most for Father Greg is that he does not see these teenagers as different from himself. He experiences kinship with them. He says this: "Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a covenant between equals."¹

¹ Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (Free Press, 2010).

Today we are exploring the sixth spiritual practice of the Way of Jesus, the Way of Love. This spiritual practice is called “Go.” To “go” doesn’t mean just to get moving. It means to move in the direction God calls us. St. John’s parishioner Rie Gilsdorf wrote a blog post about her personal experience of the practice “Go” which will appear on the St. John’s “Way of Love” website page tomorrow. In it she talks about her own personal experience of the practice “Go,” which manifests in different ways in her life. There’s a Moses Go, which is about doing something really terrifically risky like challenge the despot of the most powerful empire on earth to free slaves. There is a Jonah Go, which is about God calling you to do the last thing on earth you would want to do—in Jonah’s case, to call the oppressors of his own people to repentance. There is a Good Samaritan Go, which is about attending to what comes right in front of us with compassion and generosity instead of denial and distaste. For Father Gregory Boyle, I’d imagine the practice “Go” is about continuing to trust that in his work with young men and women in Los Angeles who have been gang members, that God’s Spirit is at work, and that all he has to do is keep going.

My husband Jeff works with addicts and alcoholics, and he often tells them that as long as they are pointed in the right direction, all they have to do is keep putting one foot in front of the other. “Go” is like that. It’s that in every given moment, we are called to look for where the love and life of God is operating. Once we find that, we are called to point our faces in that direction and move toward it. It’s also about paying attention the broader currents in our personal and communal lives, and being willing to risk change, the unknown, in order to more fully follow the Way of Jesus. Then we will be exercising the spiritual practice called Go.

A few weeks ago several hundred people gathered at the Bishop Whipple building in St. Paul to draw attention to the immigrant detainees in the building who are being deported directly from the building to the airport on a daily basis. From a political perspective of course immigration is a complex issue. From a perspective of faith, it's less complicated. Over and over in our scripture, God calls the people of Israel to care for the stranger, because they were once strangers in Egypt. So about a dozen folks from St. John's went to attend this prayer vigil along with hundreds of other Episcopalians and ecumenical and interfaith partners. During it, a group of clergy attempted to serve communion to the people in the building, both the detainees and the court officials and the guards. As they walked toward the entrance in the rear, an ICE officer pulled his car in front of them and would not allow them to proceed. In that moment, how would they seek to follow the practice "Go"? Would "go" mean to go around the car in civil disobedience and risk arrest? What they chose to do was to treat the ICE officer with respect and dignity. They asked in a hundred different ways to be allowed to share communion with their brothers and sisters in Christ. They offered the ICE officer communion. They called him their brother. For them in that moment, "go" meant to reach out in love toward someone who was hostile to them, because they could see themselves in him.

In the end the group was not allowed into the building. The name on the building has not changed. Perhaps to the world it looked like a bunch of nerdy Episcopalians doing something powerless. But they were exercising the practice "Go"—they were getting outside their comfort zone in order to ask for change, to advocate for the stranger.

When I was preparing this sermon, I realized the risk I would be taking in sharing these more dramatic stories with you, the story of Father Gregory Boyle and the people of faith doing a prayer vigil at the Bishop Whipple

building in St. Paul. Both of these are outside most of our everyday experiences. It would be easy to think that the spiritual practice “Go” is primarily about bold unusual moments in our lives. But these kinds of stories are only possible when we have practiced “Go” in the small everyday things of life over time. So how do you and I do that, not only in the big choices we make about our vocations and in advocating for systemic change, but in daily life?

The first thing I can tell you about that is that we need the support of all the other practices in order to sustain the practice “go.” We need to turn, to be pointed in the right direction, before movement is of any value. We need to learn the teachings of Jesus and the stories of our tradition in order to discover guidance and support. We need prayer, the constant intention to be in contact with God, and worship, the community of faith that gathers together to be nourished. We need blessing—the orientation of receiving and offering selfless love and service. Then, we can discern the leading of God’s Spirit and “go” to follow it. And after all these things, we need regular rhythms of rest.

So how is that going? As we’ve been talking about the spiritual practices this fall, have you had the chance to begin to engage them in your daily life? Where do you start with *this* practice, the practice called Go?

Some of you might remember that about twenty years ago a Buddhist meditation teacher and medical professor named Jon Kabat-Zinn published a book called *Wherever you Go, There you Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*². In it he talks about the vital practice of mindfulness, which is about actually seeing where you are and how you are, with kindness, and seeing the world around you and how it actually is, before you do anything else.

² Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever you Go, There You Are* (1994).

I think the paradox of the spiritual practice “Go” is that in order truly to “Go”, to move toward God’s Spirit, one first has to be crystal clear about where one actually is. In our culture it seems to me that the tendency is to be in constant frenetic motion as a way to be numb or to succeed or whatever else our motives might be. So this week, I’d like to invite all of us to the paradox of beginning with stillness, so that when you do “Go”, it is with consciousness and intention. Let’s actually begin right now, and I’m going to ask the Eucharistic Minister who is going to lead us into the Nicene Creed or the Affirmation of Faith to allow at least a full 60 seconds of silence before we move on with the service.

I’m going to ask a few questions, and leave silence afterward. If you’d like, please close your eyes.

What is happening in your body and mind, actually, in this moment? Can you see yourself, as you actually are in this moment, with kindness?

Is there any part of your life where you have been rushing around to avoid knowing what is actually true?

Instead of fixing this problem or rushing to a solution, I’d invite you to simply hold space with this awareness this week. Where is God in this situation? How can you simply move toward the love of God? Amen.