

NEW YEARS EVE 2024

Seven Buses Worth

Tomorrow is a New Year so tonight is New Year's Eve.

I'd like to frame my sermon today with a quote

from poet Robert Frost's question, "***How many things***

have to happen to you before something occurs to you?"

How many things last year – like heavy expensive security

to protect the watchers at Times Square who were watching the ball
come down and will do so again this evening:

and, what about the horrific, terrible drug epidemic

that keeps on killing so many young adults and innocent children;

the adolescent suicide rate topping and exceeding deaths

by car accidents and illnesses; and our being held captive

to our gadgets so that we check them twenty-four times a day,

or, our endless and mindless ongoing consumerism;

our deeply divided country suffering from a kind of

soul sickness no one can seem to label

but everyone feels it, knows that it's there.

How many broken values, broken relationships, broken dreams,

and broken hearts before it occurs to us that something is wrong

with the way we are living?

Not quite the snappy holiday questions you expected, are they?

But these are definitely questions for New Year's, 2024!

At one time, I confess, I would look for answers to these questions among the wise and noble of our country and church, yet somehow, they seem to be in short supply.

So, I thought, as a sign of the times, I would look to the mean streets on the other side of the country, to a section of Los Angeles.

And there I found an “**expert**” – and what an expert!

He's a Jesuit priest named Father Greg Boyle, known as “**G**” in his neighborhood, a neighborhood that happens to harbor the murderous gang members of Los Angeles; in fact, it's a place recognized as the gang capital of the world.

To help these desperate, hopeless, heavily tattooed, gang members who live more of their lives in prison than out on the streets comes Father Greg – or Father G – who founded “**Homeboy Industries,**” which has a lot of visitors and tourists curious about his hoodlum employees who are known as the “**Homies.**”

Every single day Father G deals with druggies, pushers, pimps, jailbirds, the poor, the fatherless, and the defeated.

He gets them jobs, because he is their father figure, and he also

buries them when they become victims of turf wars and overdose.

“Kids I love killing the kids I love” is his lament.

But every single day he relentlessly brings to them
what we desperately need for the New Year: ***hope***.

Anyway, I knew I found who I was looking for
and so, my New Year's message will be his message.

I've raided his book, ***“Tattoos on the Heart,”***
to share some of his searing stories.

Listen in because they are our stories.

Father G, says:

Jose taps me on the shoulder. ***“Jose,”*** I exclaimed,
“When did you get out?”

Short little guy, his smile is bigger than he is.

Jose is fifteen and part of a gang.

He's been discharged from a probation camp where he served
six months for writing on walls and skipping school.

“Can I talk to you, G? In your office?”

I sit behind my desk and he takes a long envelope
and slaps it in front of me.

“My grades,” he announces proudly, ***“from camp... Straight A's.”***

I opened the envelope and there it is: 2C 's, two B's, and 1 A –

“Well, well I think, “not quite accurate, not quite straight A 's.”

I hand him back the transcript and say,

“Wow, Fermi could not be one bit better, nice going, Jose.”

Then I add, ***“If you were my son, I would be the proudest man alive.”***

That does it! In a flash, this little 15 year old who's been an adult all his life, with absent parents and a grandmother trying her best to raise him, whose best friend I just buried a month ago killed in our street for no reason at all, was unable to stop the flow of tears.

I let him cry it out and placed my hand on his shoulder.

“You're gonna be OK,” I tell him.

Jose sets up and wipes his tears. ***“I just want to have a life,”*** he says.

“I just want to have a life.”

Something to think about. Do **you** have a life? A real life.

Not the copycat, Facebook, consumerist life that passes for a living, but a deep life that gives, shares, and heals?

Is one of your New Year's resolutions to go deeper this year than the surface of your life last year?

Are you ready this New Year to embrace what you have been putting off: to become a saint?

Are you at a point when, weary of conformity and celebrity, you just want to have a life that counts?

Again, from Father G:

At a county detention facility, I was getting to know 14-year-old Rigo, who was about to make his first Holy Communion.

The church volunteers had found him a white shirt and a black tie, we still have 15 minutes to go, so I'm asking Rigo the basic stuff about his family and his life. I asked about his father.

“Oh,” he says, “He’s a heroin addict and never really been in my life. Used to always beat my rear-end. Fact, he’s in prison right now.”

Then suddenly, for some reason, a terrible memory jumps out of him.

“I think I was in the 4th grade,” he begins.

“I came home sent home in the middle of the day.

Got into some trouble at school – I can’t remember what it was.

When I got home my father was there.

He was hardly ever there.

He said, “Why did they send you home?”

And, ‘cause my dad always beat me,

I said, “If I tell you, promise you won’t hit me?”

He just said, I’m your father. ‘Course I’m not going to hit you.

So I told him?”

Rigo begins to cry. When he is able to speak, he says only,

“He beat me up with a pipe... With a pipe!”

When Rigo compose himself, I ask, ***“And your mom?”***

He points some distance to a tiny woman standing by the entrance.

“That’s her over there.

There’s no one like her.

I’ve been locked up for more than a year and half,

she comes to see me every Sunday.

You know how many buses she takes every Sunday

to see my sorry behind?”

Then, quite unexpectedly, he cries again for a long time

and then gasping through his tears, he says over and over,

“Every Sunday! Seven buses! She takes seven buses. Imagine!”

A New Year's question for you:

Why do we have such a hard time grasping in our minds and hearts

that we have a God who has taken ***“Seven Buses”***

just to arrive among us in a poor manger

and share our lives and bring us peace?

Why can't we grasp that we are loved by a loving God

and that is our deepest identity?

A few days ago we celebrated the reality

that ***“The word was made flesh and took seven buses***

to dwell among us.” Believe that for 2024!

Again: Father G: “Finally, Caesar.

Caesar, a twenty-five-year-old whom I've known

since he was a frightened kid in the earthquake of 1987, calls me.

He's just got out of prison, his second home, and wants to know

if he can come and see me. He has no place to stay

and doesn't have any clothes. Can I help him?

I say, **"Sure,"** and promise to pick him up after work.

So, there he is waiting for me, and when he sees me

he jumps up and down, flies into my car and throws his arms around me.

"When I saw you right now, G, I got all happy!" he says.

We go to JCPenney, and I tell him he can buy \$200 worth of clothes.

In no time, his arms are filled with the essentials...

I dropped Caesar off at his friend's apartment.

He becomes quiet and vulnerable.

He says, ***"I just don't want to go back to prison period I'm scared."***

"Look son," I say to him, ***"Who's got a better heart than you?"***

And God is the center of that great big old heart.

Hang on to that, dog – because you have what the world wants."

We say our goodbyes.

At 3:00 in the morning, the phone rings. It's Caesar.

He is sober and it's urgent that he talked to me.

"I gotta ask you a question.

You know how I've always seen you as my father –

ever since I was a little kid?

Well, I have to ask you a question.”

Now Caesar pauses and the gravity of it all

makes his voice waver and crumble. ***“Have I... been... your son?”***

“Oh, hell, yeah,” I say.

“Whew,” Caesar exhales. ***“I thought so.”***

Now his voice becomes enmeshed in a cadence of gentle sobbing.

“Then... I will be your son. And you... will be my father.

And nothing will separate us. Right?”

“That's right.”

Now take in Father G's comment and internalize it:

“In this early morning call,

Caesar did not discover that he has a father.

He discovered that he is a son worth having.”

And you? Here today:

Remember that you are a son, a daughter, worth having.

No matter what your history, what your experience,

you are of inestimable value, ceaselessly loved,

inerasably God's child –

so your resolution for 2024 is – ***Don't act less than who you are.***

Bring into the New Year these words quoted by Nelson Mandela:

“Our worst fear is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.

***We ask ourselves, “Who am I to be brilliant,
gorgeous, talented, and fabulous?”***

Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of God; you're playing small doesn't serve the world.

***There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people
won't feel insecure around you.***

We were born to make manifest the glory of God within us.

It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone.

And as we let our light shine,

we subconsciously give other people

permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fears,

our presence automatically liberates others.”

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To this – with Jose, Rigo, Caesar and Father G – we add... Amen... Amen.