

AWESTRUCK BY GOD 7/19/26

Good Morning! A couple of weeks ago, I finally got to meet Fr. Gregory Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries in 1988. Today it is the world's largest reentry organization for formerly gang-involved and previously incarcerated people. Their two unwavering, core principles are, "WE ARE ALL UNSHAKABLY GOOD – NO EXCEPTIONS. And, WE ALL BELONG TO EACH OTHER – NO MATTER WHAT." Can I get an Ay-men?

In his latest book called **Cherished Belonging**, Fr. Greg remembers the time he shared those principles at an LA Times event and then asked the question, "Now, do I think all of our vexing and complex social dilemmas would disappear if we embraced these two notions?" He paused and then continued, "Yes, I do." The entire audience exploded into laughter. They couldn't believe their ears and I'm pretty sure most of them felt like Fr. Greg was naive beyond belief. But that's exactly what they do and the results speak for themselves in the changed lives that come out of Homeboy Industries.

Fr. G, as his folks call him, always brings two Homeboys along to his talks. Yes they illustrate how lives begin to change when they are embraced with unconditional compassion and acceptance but, more importantly, Fr. G brings them along because he wants them to know that all three of them belong to each other. Saturday was no exception. One of the young men, Ignacio, shared that when he was nine, his mother took him down to the tip of Baja California and left him at an

orphanage, explaining that she had found him on the road, hitchhiking. His grandmother rescued him 90 days later and brought him back to LA but the trauma had already broken him and when he was 12, he was initiated into a street gang. The gang made him feel like he belonged, something he never felt at home.

Juan, the other homie, lost his first friend at 12, shot down by police in a gun fight. But with less than a year in the program, these two young men, formerly warring gang members, are now friends. When asked what changed, Juan said, “We made friends with our wounds!

Which brings us to our First Testament reading in Genesis. Last week we left off with Jacob tricking his older brother Esau into giving up his birthright. This week, we’ve got Jacob on the run. He’s just deceived his elderly father Isaac into giving him the blessing meant for Esau. That meant he would receive the lion’s share of the inheritance usually reserved in those days for the oldest son. Esau has vowed to kill him. Isaac and Rebekah think it would be a good time to send Jacob away to find a wife before Esau has a chance to wreak his vengeance on Jacob. So Jacob is sent on his way and the text says, he “came to a certain place and stayed there for the night.” The Hebrew word for “place” is a common enough word in Biblical Hebrew but it’s used 5 times in the passage, suggesting that the narrator is doing something deliberate with it. In fact, rabbinic literature eventually adopts *HaMakom* ("The Place") as one of the names for God.

Renowned Jewish biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine emphasizes that God is not restricted to a specific locale but is a “portable” God, not one tied to a mountain or a river... or a church. God is with us, wherever we are on our journey of faith. Levine also highlights that “a certain place” could refer to a liminal, in-between place, a threshold if you will. In his dream, God blesses Jacob, promising him that the ground he is camping on will be given to him and his offspring. And then God says these words, “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go. . .” Jacob wakes up awestruck by what he heard and saw. He realizes that God was in this place all along, even though he didn’t have a clue.

He renames the location Bethel which means “The House of God” and then Jacob being Jacob, tries to nail down what he heard God say. Even though the “trickster” Jacob has been gifted with a divine encounter at an accidental stop, demonstrating God's grace in the midst of his own human disruption, Jacob doesn’t stop being Jacob. He can’t help himself. The last three verses of chapter 28 which weren’t in our reading, might sound like Jacob is bartering with God. Jacob says, “If God gets me to where I’m going and gives me food to eat and clothes to wear, until I get back home, **then** I will give back one-tenth of everything I own.

But a more careful reading is that Jacob was using the language of the day to bind an agreement with God. God meets Jacob with unconditional love and acceptance at Bethel and Jacob true to form,

repeats back to God in an if/then pattern typical of his culture's normal way of binding oneself to God. He brings his whole self--awe and haggling both--into the same encounter. And if we're honest with ourselves, we have to admit that we do the same thing when something magical happens out of the clear blue that we can't explain but automatically want to maximize our good fortune while the iron is hot so to speak.

As we turn to today's gospel parable about the wheat and the weeds, I love Levine's reminder that parables are not intended to teach a single universal moral. She writes, "[They are] designed to surprise, challenge, shake up, and disturb." In fact, if religion is supposed to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted, if we hear a parable and think, "'I really like that,' or worse, fail to take up any challenge, we are probably not listening well enough."

For me, looking at Jacob is like looking in a mirror. The wheat and the weeds in Jacob never fully separate into two different men; he goes to his grave as Jacob-Israel, trickster and one-who-strives-with-God simultaneously. As we say in recovery, it's always progress and never perfection.

The weeds and the wheat are a metaphor for what exists inside all of us. NOT JUST SOME OF US, ALL OF US. Origen, one of our early church fathers who lived from 185-253 AD, was as far as I could tell, the first one to realize this. It's an approach that among other things, eliminates

the need most of us have to blame the other guy or gal for all the bad in the world. For Jacob the weed was his bargaining, and the wheat was his awe at noticing that God had been present all along.

And, here is what I want to leave you with. **Fr. Greg redefines sin as a case of mistaken identity. We've forgotten who we really are, children of God. And when we begin to realize that, that we are all, indeed, children of God, unshakably good, always belonging to each other, then by simply embracing our humanity, without judging, without eliminating, without labeling anything, we are finally liberated to really love each other.**

Fr. Greg calls this an “acatamiento” moment that can change how we live. Acatamiento means “affectionate awe.” Instead of bargaining with God, we respond to God’s affectionate glance at us, a glance that accepts us as we are, with gratitude and with relief. And by looking at others the same way, standing in affectionate awe of what people have to carry without judgment, has the potential to ignite an insurrection of kindness. The object of the awe is the weight itself — the sheer scale of what a person is bearing — not their virtue, not their success in bearing it well, not even really their resilience. Mayor Mamdani joined 100 inmates at Ryker’s Island just last week to watch a world cup semi-final match. In effect he let the men know that everyone belongs, no matter what.

Acatamiento—affectionate awe!

And whatever burdens we carry — different in kind, if not in weight, from those Juan and Ignacio had to carry — we can know that God's love for us is as unconditional as his love for those two men.

May we all find an opportunity this week to reflect on God's unconditional gaze of affectionate awe for us and reflect that gaze back for those who are carrying their burden all alone.

Amen!