

Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion
by Greg Boyle, S.J., pp. 71-75

Pema Chodron, an ordained Buddhist nun, writes of compassion and suggests that its truest measure lies not in our service to those on the margins, but in our willingness to see ourselves in kinship with them. In 1987 Dolores Mission Church declared itself a sanctuary church for the undocumented, after passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. Soon, recently arrived undocumented men from Mexico and Central America would sleep each night in the church (Guadalupe Homeless Project), and women and children, in the convent (Casa Miguel Pro).

Attention followed and lots of it. The media swarmed the place in these earliest days. As almost always happens, attention begets opposition. I used to dread clearing the parish's answering machine during this period. It always had a handful of hate messages and vague (and not so vague) death threats.

Once, while I turn the corner in front of the church, heading to a CEB [small Christian group] meeting in the projects, I am started by letters spray-painted crudely across the front steps: WETBACK CHURCH

The chill of it momentarily stops me. In an instant, you begin to doubt and question the price of things. I acknowledge how much better everything is when there is no cost and how I prefer being hoisted on the shoulders in acclaim to the disdain of anonymous spray cans.

I arrive at the meeting and tell the gathered women about our hostile visitor during the night. "I guess I'll get one of the homies to clean it up later."

Petra Saldana, a normally quiet member of the group, takes charge. "You will not clean that up."

Now, I was new at the parish and my Spanish was spotty. I understood the words she spoke but had difficulty circling in on the sense of it.

"You will not clean this up. If there are people in our community who are disparaged and hated and left out because they are *mojados* (wetbacks)..." Then she poises herself on the edge of the couch, practically read to leap to her feet. "Then we shall be proud to call ourselves a wetback church."

These women didn't just want to serve the less fortunate, they were anchored in some profound oneness with them and became them.

"That you may be one as the Father and I are one."

Jesus and Petra are on the same page here. They chose a oneness in kinship and a willingness to live in others' hearts. Jesus was not a man for others. He was one with others. There is a world of difference in that. Jesus didn't seek the rights of lepers. He

touched the leper even before he got around to curing him. He didn't fight for improved conditions for the prisoner. He simply said, "I was in prison."

The strategy of Jesus is not centered in taking the right stand on issues, but rather in standing in the right place—with the outcast and those relegated to the margins.

Once the homeless began to sleep in the church at night, there was always the faintest evidence that they had. Come Sunday morning, we would foo foo the place as best we could. We would sprinkle I Love My Carpet on the rugs and vacuum like crazy. We would strategically place potpourri and Air Wick around the church to combat this lingering, pervasive reminder that nearly fifty (and later up to one hundred) men had spent the night there. About the only time we used incense at Dolores Mission was on Sunday morning, before the 7:30 a.m. mass crowd would arrive. Still, try as we might, the smell remained. The grumbling set in, and people spoke of "churching" elsewhere...

The smell was never overwhelming, just undeniably there. The Jesuits figured that if "we can't fix it, then we'll feature it." So we determined to address the discontent in our homilies one Sunday. Homilies were often dialogic in those days, so one day I begin with, "What's the church smell like?"

People are mortified, eye contact ceases, women are searching inside their purses for they know not what. "Come on, now" I throw back at them, "what's the church smell like?"

"Huele a patas" (Smells like feet), Don Rafael booms out. He was old and never cared what people thought.

"Excellent. But why does it smell like feet?"

"Cuz many homeless men slept here last night?" says a woman.

"Well, why do we let that happen here?"

"Es nuestro compromiso" (It's what we've committed to do), says another.

"Well, why would anyone commit to do that?"

"Porque es lo que haria Jesus." (It is what Jesus would do.)

"Well, then...what's the church smell like now?"

A man stands and bellows, "Huele a nuestro compromiso" (it smells like our commitment).

The place cheers.

Guadalupe waves her arms wildly, "Huele a rosas" (smells like roses).

The packed church roars with laughter and a newfound kinship that embraced someone else's odor as their own. The stink in the church hadn't changed, only how the folks saw it. The people at Dolores Mission had come to embody Wendell Berry's injunction: "You have to be able to imagine lives that are not yours."

Scripture scholars contend that the original language of the Beatitudes should not be rendered as "Blessed are the single-hearted" or "Blessed are the peacemakers" or "Blessed are those who struggle for justice." Greater precision in translation would say, "You're in the right place if...you are single-hearted or work for peace." The Beatitudes is not a spirituality, after all. It's a geography. It tells us where to stand.

Compassion isn't just about feeling the pain of others; it's about bringing them in toward yourself. If we love what God loves, then, in compassion, margins get erased. "Be compassionate as God is compassionate," means the dismantling of barriers that exclude.

In Scripture, Jesus is in a house so packed that no one can come through the door anymore. So the people open the roof and lower this paralytic down through it, so Jesus can heal him. The focus of the story is, understandably, the healing of the paralytic. But there is something more significant than that happening here. They're ripping the roof off the place, and those outside are being let in.