



Father Greg Boyle, Priest Welcoming the Unwelcome

Lesson Introduction

Interview Log: Interviewed on August 30, 2023 by David Bender

- Access *The Thread* episode of Father Greg Boyle on our [YouTube channel](#) or at [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)
- Access his long-form interview on [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)

Learning Objectives

Social Studies Focus

- Explore the intersection of faith, service, and justice
- Understand what social justice looks like through the work of Father Boyle
- Learn about moral courage from a very personal point of view
- Find inspiration in the power of one person to make a difference in their community

English Language Arts Focus

- Explore the emotions of loss and grief and the capacities of resilience and courage
- Examine perspective taking from the point of view of one priest and social justice advocate
- Explore the idea of purposeful work and a meaningful life
- Use Father Greg Boyle's episode as evidence to write a rhetorical argument, commentary, or synthesis essay

Episode Overview

Father Greg Boyle reflects on being raised in Los Angeles and how his Jesuit upbringing and education led him to become a priest. He discusses creating Homeboy Industries and working with previous gang members with a focus on mutual transformation. Father Boyle connects the idea of holiness to health and being rooted in love rather than specific religious beliefs.

Biography

Father Greg Boyle, a native Angeleno and Jesuit priest, served as pastor of Dolores Mission Church from 1986 to 1992. The church was located in Boyle Heights, then the poorest Catholic parish in Los Angeles, which had the highest concentration of gang activity in the city. Father Boyle witnessed the devastating impact of gang violence on his community during the so-called "decade of death" that began in the late 1980s and peaked at 1,000 gang-related killings in 1992. In the face of law enforcement tactics and criminal justice policies of suppression and mass incarceration as the means to end gang violence, Father Boyle's parish and community members adopted what was a radical approach at the time: treat gang members as human beings. In 1988 he started what would eventually become Homeboy Industries, which employs and trains former gang members in a range of social enterprises, as well as providing critical services to thousands of men and women who walk through its doors every year seeking a better life. Father Boyle is the author of the 2010 *New York Times* bestseller *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*. His new book, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*, was published in 2017. He has received the California Peace Prize and been inducted into the California Hall of Fame. In 2014, President Obama named Father Boyle a Champion of Change. He received the University of Notre Dame's 2017 Laetare Medal, the oldest honor given to American Catholics.



Teaching Tip: First Take

A **First Take** is a warm-up writing or conversation exercise created uniquely for *The Thread* that strengthens media literacy skills. Like an opening song in a musical, the first stanza of a poem, or even the first impression one person makes on another, the First Take asks students to reflect and share their initial thoughts and feelings about the episode's opening.

Suggested Steps

- ▣ **Read** the opening of Father Greg Boyle's interview aloud to students:

"I think it's important to always imagine a god that's spacious and expansive. And that's important because I think there's nothing more consequential than your notion of God. If your God is puny, then you have to be. If your God is spacious, then you'll be intimately welcoming and generous. And so you discover the generosity of God. And then you choose to be that generosity in the world. That's how it works. You know, you receive the tender glance and then you become the tender glance."



- ▣ **Ask and Discuss:** What do you learn about Father Boyle from these opening sentences? What insights can you infer?
- ▣ **Next,** have students do a one-minute quick write reflecting on what he shared or have students get into pairs and share their thoughts and feelings.
- ▣ **Last,** as a class discuss the reasons they think the filmmakers choose this opening for the episode?



Photos: Father Greg, December 9th. (top); Father Greg comforting homies at Resurrection Cemetary, 1990. (lower)



Teaching Tip:

THE THREAD Up Close

After watching the interview, have students debrief his life story with these suggested questions:

- ▣ How do you interpret the title for Father Greg Boyle's episode, "Welcoming the Unwelcome?"
- ▣ Father Boyle shared many stories. Which one touched you the most?
- ▣ How would you describe Father Boyle's character traits?
- ▣ Father Boyle talked about values that Homeboy Industries holds up as guiding principles such as belonging, love, and healing. From what you heard in the episode, how are these principles practiced?
- ▣ If Father Boyle were in the room, what would you like to ask him?

After discussing, have students return to **The Thread** episode and engage students in a close read and analysis of his interview using the video and transcript. Depending on the lesson, question, or theme you are aligning **The Thread** with, have students annotate the transcript, select passages that reflect the assignment, and explain their reasoning in class.

Here is an example of **A Thread** connection (edited for clarity and brevity) to use if you are exploring ideas of human goodness. Father Boyle recounted that he was once on a panel and was discussing the two principles that are foundational at Homeboy - that everyone is unshakably good and we belong to each other, no exceptions. He then asked the crowd:

"Do I think that all our vexing complex social dilemmas that need our addressing would simply go away if we embrace those two foundational notions?" I paused and said, "Yeah, I do," ... I think gang members have taught me that over the past 40 years - that everybody's unshakably good. Now, there's some things that block the view, despair that's dark or trauma that's enormous or real mental illness. But none of it touches their goodness. Their goodness is intact. So the idea is, how do you find it?"



Photos: Always welcomed here. (left); Father Greg laughing at Homeboy Industries. (right)



Connections

- When there was no school for students who had been kicked out of their neighborhood school for being gang members, Father Boyle started one. It was the same with jobs. With “Nothing stops a bullet like a job” as the slogan at Homeboy Industries, he created jobs for young men no one else would hire because of their felony records. It has now evolved into the largest gang rehab program on the planet, and healing is the centerpiece with justice enterprises. As Father Boyle shared, “Every human being wants their mom to be proud and their kids not to be ashamed.”
 - What did you learn about healing and love and belonging from this interview?
- Father Boyle explained that the goal of working with folks on the margin is not to make a difference but to make you different. How do you understand the difference between making a difference and making you different?
- Father Boyle recounts how after a dream he had, he immediately changed the way he was working. He realized that he had been trying to save people but no longer could. It couldn't be about him and he needed to be “content with the fact that everybody owns a flashlight and everybody knows where to aim it.” In your own words, discuss your interpretation of this story, of aiming the flashlight in the general direction of the light switch.
- What new insights did you gain about (yourself, your community, your world) from his work and the many facets of Homeboy Industries?

Activity: Welcoming the Unwelcome

Using evidence culled from Father Greg Boyle's THREAD episode, or other relevant texts, write an essay analyzing his statement “Love, it's still the fastest route.” Encourage students to explore Homeboy Industries and Father Boyle's other talks and interviews in the Additional Resources to support their analysis.



Additional Resources

- Learn more about the work of Father Greg Boyle by exploring these organizations:
 - [Dolores Mission](#)
 - [Homeboy Industries](#)
- Listen to a few more interviews with Father Boyle on these podcasts:
 - [“The Case for Hope”](#) with Father Greg Boyle
 - [“Take 2 – Father Greg Boyle on Character, Change and Kindness Dosing”](#)



Photos: Groundbreaking. (left); Homeboy Industries. (right)

