“The Gates of Hope”
John 12:20-33; Jeremiah 32:6-15
(Part VI of VIII in the sermon series, “The Essence of Christianity”)

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From the Pulpit
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“The Gates of Hope”
Rev. Emily Krause Corzine
John 12: 20-33/Jeremiah 32:6-15
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Jesuit priest Gregory Boyle is the founder of Homeboy Industries in the Delores Mission of Los Angeles. Since the 1980s, Father Boyle has worked to provide jobs and education as alternatives to the gangs and senseless violence found on the streets. What Father Boyle found was a lethal absence of hope that led kids into gangs and the perpetual cycle of gang violence compounded people’s despair. Homeboy Industries, is the largest, most comprehensive and most successful gang intervention, rehabilitation and re-entry programs in the country. They have helped over 120,000 gang members since they began.

It’s a training program and a business. Homeboy Industries operates as a symbol as much as a place of concrete help. It started by asking the city of Los Angeles, “What if we were to invest in gang members, rather than just seek to incarcerate our way out of this problem?” 

Father Boyle is convinced that not much in his life makes any sense outside of God. A place like Homeboy Industries

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is all folly and bad business unless the core of the endeavor seeks to imitate the kind of God one ought to believe in. ....and in the end, he is helpless to explain why anyone would accompany those on the margins were it not for some anchored belief that [God] thought this was a good idea.\(^2\) Boyle shares stories of his work at Homeboy Industries in a book called, *Tattoos on the Heart*. One story is about a 15 year old named, Rigo. Rigo is in a county detention facility outside of Los Angeles, called Camp Paige. Boyle meets Rigo before he is about to take his first communion in the prison gymnasium and learns more about his family. Rigo’s father was a heroin addict and an abuser. He would repeatedly hit Rigo with a pipe. The violence left a profound impact on Rigo. He cannot share this story without breaking down.

When Boyle asked about his mom, however, Rigo composes himself and points across the Gymnasium to a tiny woman standing at the entrance. “That’s her over there,” Rigo says, “There’s no one like her.” I’ve been locked up for more than a year and a half and she comes to see me every Sunday. You know how many buses she takes every Sunday?” Then gasping through his tears, he says, “Seven buses. She takes…seven…buses. Imagine.”

\(^2\) Ibid, 21.
Father Boyle reflecting on that exchange says, “How then, to imagine, the expansive heart of God—greater than God—who takes seven buses just to arrive at us. We settle sometimes for less than intimacy with God when all God longs for is this solidarity with us. The desire of God’s heart is immeasurably larger than our imaginations can conjure. This longing of God’s to give us peace and assurance and a sense of well-being only awaits our willingness to cooperate with God’s limitless [generosity].”

“A place like Homeboy Industries is all folly and bad business unless the core of the endeavor seeks to imitate the kind of God one ought to believe in.”

Another story of a man who made a bad business decision. His name is Jeremiah. If you read a little further from the passage that was just read a few moments ago, you come across this story (in Chapter 32: 6-15). I had clearly forgotten about it until a colleague reminded me of it a few weeks ago. (READ Jeremiah 32:6-15)

It seems like a fairly odd text to but it is a story of hope. During Jeremiah’s long prophetic career, God often called upon him to deliver messages of judgment and doom.
Babylon had become the strongest power in the Middle East and had attacked Judah. Jerusalem was under siege. The old king, along with many other prominent citizens had been deported. The new king was tired of Jeremiah and his prophecies so the new king threw him in jail. From his prison cell Jeremiah got the word that his relatives wanted to sell some land.

And God told Jeremiah to buy that piece of land. In the middle of a war, with the enemy closing in, God told Jeremiah to purchase a piece of land. Any way you look at it, buying a piece of land in a war zone was an utterly foolish thing to do. The Babylonians were at the gate. Buying land at that time would have been a bad investment. It is like investing a shopping mall in Aleppo, Tikrit or Eastern Ukraine today.

But that is precisely what Jeremiah did. Jeremiah got all the witnesses, signatures, seals and copies of the deeds. All parts of this real estate transaction were meticulous. He even put the deed in an earthen jar (the ancient version of a safety deposit box). All of this made it seem like this real estate purchase mattered. Jeremiah knew how bad things were for the nations. The situation was tenuous. But here’s the thing, he acted like a person who had a future; he acted as though
the people of God had a future. He invested in hope. It is as if he said, “Things will be rough for a while. You’ll have to leave your homeland but it won’t last forever. Someday you’ll return.” Scripture (Jer.32:15) reads, “For thus says the Lord of host, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.”

Jeremiah didn’t preach on hope. He didn’t write inspirational articles on hope. He bought a piece of land.³ People of faith have a unique gift to share with the world: the gift of hope. It is not a foolish or naïve hope. Like Jeremiah, we know just how bad things are, just how deep the problems go. We know there are no easy solutions to ISIS, peace in the Middle East, immigration, racism. We know our communities are riddled with gun violence, human trafficking and high rates of infant mortality. We read story after story of hopelessness.

But Jeremiah reminds us that these problems will not always be with us.

“For thus says the Lord of host, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.” (Jeremiah 32: 15)

³ With profound thanks to Rev. Amy Miracle, Broad Street Presbyterian Church, Investing in Hope, sermon Thanksgiving Day 2008. This sermon inspired today’s sermon.
Our future rests with God. That knowledge is the source of our hope. Our hope comes as a light shining in the darkness. Life overcomes death. Death will not have the final word. The One who came to redeem the world is our hope. The One whose path we follow, the One who would take on human suffering in the form of a slave, the One who died and yet rose again--That One!! That One is Jesus Christ, and is the One in whom we have hope.

Hope is placed in our hearts by a gracious and loving God, who reminds us of something bigger than ourselves. It’s a hope written on our hearts and rooted in the very nature of God. That hope can be trusted. That hope, we can carry with us.

What do you hope for? Many this weekend hope they still have a team in their basketball bracket? Some hope for an acceptance letter or call back for the next round of interviews. Maybe you hope for an end to a personal struggle? Guidance and help for a family member? Peace after a long, tumultuous divorce? Clarity for what the next steps are after a terrible diagnosis? . . .
Unitarian Universalist pastor, Rev. Victoria Safford, tells the story of her friend who is a psychiatrist and who was deeply affected by the suicide of a young college woman whom she counseled. When her friend finally spoke out of the ashes of that day, she said:

“You know I cannot save them. I am not here to save anybody or to save the world. All I can do—What I am called to do—is to plant myself at the gates of Hope. Sometimes they come in; sometimes they walk by. But I stand there every day and I call out till my lungs are sore with calling, and beckon and urge them in toward a beautiful life and love…”

Rev. Safford goes on “there’s something for all of us there, I think. Whatever our vocation, we stand, beckoning and calling, singing and shouting, planted at the gates of Hope. This world and our people are beautiful and broken, and we are called to raise that up—to bear witness to the possibility of living with dignity, bravery and gladness that befits a human being. That may be what it is to “live our mission.”

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Rev. Safford wrote a poem called “The Gates of Hope” in response to her friend, she writes:

Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope –
Not the prudent gates of Optimism,
Which are somewhat narrower.
Not the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense;
Nor the strident gates of Self-Righteousness,
Which creak on shrill and angry hinges
(People cannot hear us there; they cannot pass through)
Nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of
“Everything is gonna’ be all right.”
But a different, sometimes lonely place,
The place of truth-telling,
About your own soul first of all and its condition.
The place of resistance and defiance,
The piece of ground from which you see the world
Both as it is and as it could be
As it will be;
The place from which you glimpse not only struggle,
But the joy of the struggle.
And we stand there, beckoning and calling,
Telling people what we are seeing
Asking people what they see.

~ The Gates of Hope by Rev. Victoria Safford,
UU minister
So what if we planted ourselves there…firmly at the Gates of Hope. Would we sense the intimacy that God is calling us into? The sense of deep awareness of God’s love and care for each of us just as we are? Can we name for ourselves the times when God’s overwhelming grace poured over us and reminded us that we are important and valued and loved? What would it be like plant ourselves at those gates, calling and crying out into a world that so needs to see the beautiful life and love in Jesus Christ?

Living into the Hope that is placed before us is what God calls us to do. God calls us to live lives shaped by that hope. God calls us to act on that hope. That’s why Rigo mom took seven buses each Sunday. That is why Jeremiah bought a piece of land. That’s why we do so many of the things that we do…why we volunteer, why we recycle, why we advocate for issues of justice for all people, why we bring children into the world. God calls us to live and dream and act as a people who have a future.

We live into Hope together. Hope is what holds us together as a Christian community. Together, we stand at those gates of Hope….sharing with the world what we see and asking others what they see. Someday, God will take this battered
and broken world into God’s tender care and into God’s expansive heart and will make all things new.

Hope is a matter of the heart. It’s an essential part of the Essence of Christianity.

So stand at the Gates of Hope.

Amen.

Benediction
May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13

Prayer for Illumination:
Let us Pray: Gracious God in the quietness of these moments, silence in us any voice but your own. As Scripture is read and your word proclaimed, let us hear with joy and challenge what you have for us this day.
Our Gospel Lesson comes from the Gospel of John Chapter 12 verses 20-33.

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’ Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

**Jesus Speaks about His Death**

‘Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—“Father, save me from this hour”? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to
him.’ Jesus answered, ‘This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

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