

From the book *Tattoos on the Heart* by Father Gregory Boyle:

*Bill cared for his father as he died of cancer. His father had become a frail man, dependent on Bill to do everything for him. Though he was physically not what he had been, and the disease was wasting him away, his mind remained alert and lively. In the role reversal common to adult children who care for their dying parents, Bill would put his father to bed and then read him to sleep, exactly as his father had done for him in childhood. Bill would read from some novel, and his father would lie there, staring at his son, smiling. Bill was exhausted from the day's care and work and would plead with his dad, "Look, here's the idea. I read to you, you fall asleep." Bill's father would impishly apologize and dutifully close his eyes. But this wouldn't last long.*

*Soon enough, Bill's father would pop one eye open and smile at his son. Bill would catch him and whine, "Now, come on." The father would again oblige until he couldn't anymore, and the other eye would open to catch a glimpse of his son. This went on and on and after his father's death, Bill knew that this evening ritual was really a story of a father who just couldn't take his eyes off his kid.*

Over the past couple of weeks, I've spoken about some of the different conceptualizations that one might hold for the meaning of the word "God." We've spoken about a god that sometimes seemingly works against us as portrayed in the tower of babel story; or a god that gambles with our very lives as shown in the Book of Job; or an alternative conceptualization where god might be subconsciously nudging us forward, whispering in our ear, causing us to "say yes" to life. These are simply a few of the many different conceptualizations of God across time and cultures.

Today, I'm going to talk about an alternative conceptualization of a god that loves us, yet is deeply flawed as well. And although many people are either agnostic or atheistic regarding god, I hope that this reframing might be useful for other relationships in your life.

This story appeared in a wonderful little book *Tattoos on the Heart* by Father Gregory Boyle, a catholic parish priest in a crime-ridden, gang infested Latino section of Los Angeles. He is the founder of Homeboy Industries, a gang intervention, rehabilitation and workforce re-entry program in Los Angeles.

Father G, as his homies call him, caps this story with a quote from the Indian Jesuit priest Anthony De Mello “Behold the One beholding you, and smiling.” That’s a One with a capital “O”; that this is how God sees you. “Behold the One beholding you and smiling” – as if God can’t take her eyes off you; that God delights in you, more than you could ever know, or feel worthy of.

Later in his book, Father G discusses the phrase “God Loves Us.”

We’ve all heard people say this time and time again. Father G admits that for the longest time in his life, although he’d repeatedly hear this phrase, he never truly felt that, for whatever reason, to be included in the “us” – that it was as if God was reaching around and cradling everyone except him – that he was somehow just outside of God’s grasp; and that if God did love him, she did so begrudgingly, as if God didn’t really have a choice in the matter. And that only later in his life, when reflecting on his friend Bill’s story that I related earlier, did he begin to feel that he as always included in God’s embrace.

But you might ask yourself, why would God who “loves us, delights in us, can’t take her eyes off of us” let such bad things happen to good people. We have hurricanes, injustice, disease, war, environmental destruction, earthquakes, avalanches, gang violence in a drug infested Los Angeles Latino neighborhood.

If God is some type of divine creator, she’s not doing a very good job. Is this some type of Beta version of Earth or the Universe? A rough draft? Why do bad things happen to good people? ...or even bad people? Can’t God do better than that?

These are fair questions that have been asked since the beginning of time.

I was thinking about my parents; my father recently passed away and my mother is still with us. But with them, all my life, I never once felt that I was ever outside the reach of their loving grasp – never once. They simply loved me no matter what. The essence of their love had a “no matter whatness” quality (that Father G talks about) to it. That is special. I know not everybody has that. I’ve been truly blessed. I’ve always felt that my parents loved me, delighted in me and although it sounds selfish, couldn’t take their eyes off me; or any of their children ...but...

...but...my parents weren’t always perfect. No. Although they always seemed to have my best interests in mind sometimes the path they thought I should take did not align with the path I thought I should take. Sometimes they gave me very bad advice. Sometimes, it was hurtful.

I have eight siblings and with six of them older than me, my parents had pretty much seen it all by the time I came around. They saw a lot of shenanigans and craziness in their day - lots of teenage angst.

Now many of you know that my wife, Tammy, is an African American woman. My parents thought that they had seen it all by the time they got to me but they were wrong. They were completely unprepared when I told them that the woman I was falling in love with was an African American. I was told, "Your grandfather would roll over in his grave if he knew" and "any children you have will not know what they are."

That hurt. That really hurt. Those words were like daggers piercing my heart. It hurt Tammy too. She was unwelcome. My mother particularly did not know how to deal with it. It was simply too much.

Well, it took about a year and a half for there to be reconciliation. And it was a beautiful reconciliation. And from that time on my parents have loved Tammy as one of their own.

The thing is though, that despite that deep hurt I felt, I also felt that my parents still loved me no matter what...and that they would come around. I always knew this.

So although my parents always loved me no matter what, they gave me bad advice at times, hurt me at times. They're imperfect. Maybe God is this way also. Maybe God, who loves us, delights in us, can't take her eyes off us is imperfect as well. Maybe God doesn't get it right all the time.

So maybe you're thinking, "I don't believe in any of this God stuff to begin with. So, where does that leave me?" Well, here's a radical idea. Could UUMAN be an entity that loves us, delights in us, can't take its eyes off us? Could UUMAN be that entity that loves you, delights in you, can't take its eyes off you?

Does that sound crazy? If so, why? Why wouldn't you want or why couldn't it be that UUMAN be that which could hold you in this way – to love you no matter what?

"UUMAN didn't support my ideas in the visioning process."

"They didn't hire the person I thought that they should hire."

"They didn't support my plan regarding "fill in the blank."

Yes. Sometimes we don't get our way here. Sometimes the path we are so passionate about taking isn't taken by this church. We sometimes feel ignored. Sometimes we don't feel listened to. And that can feel hurtful.

We went through some difficult times at my home congregation a few years back. It was painful. It hurt. It hurt just to see the hurt in the congregation I loved so much. And some people left. And I can understand that. Sometimes the compromise, or what it takes to continue, is simply a bridge too far. And although I would never advise anyone to stick it out in any type of abusive, unhealthy or damaging relationship, for me, the situation at my home congregation didn't even come close to such a level of dysfunction that would qualify as a bridge too far.

So my role, my duty in this situation? Continue to show up; even though it's painful; continue to show up. Stay in the game.

Because even though sometimes things don't work out the way you want here at UUMAN, does that mean that the church loves you any less? I never doubted that my parents loved me no matter what. Can you believe that UUMAN can love you no matter what? I can. I most definitely can. I believe we can create something new. I believe we can expand our relationship.

I believe that the people who lead the richest, fullest lives, the people who seem to be most spiritually mature are those who have grown and expanded the circle of things that they love with the quality of no matter whatness. But, how do they do this because no matter whatness implies that the object of their love is imperfect, - that it can hurt them and cause them pain? Yet they love anyway. How do they do this? Maybe it's because they realize that like God, like my parents, like everything else that they themselves are imperfect and that if love were somehow contingent upon perfection there'd never be any love in this world.

Someone who I think grew and expanded this circle of no matter whatness love was Mister Rogers – one of my heroes. Just watching that show – I could just feel the love and acceptance at every moment. Thinking about it – simply to exude and extend that no matter whatness love via the medium of television was truly amazing. But that show did that for me – and no doubt for many others as well.

Maybe we could expand that circle here at UUMAN. Maybe we could grow love here. Maybe we, despite our imperfections, can at least attempt to extend, at every moment, via the medium of this very congregation, that no matter whatness love to all.