

PLAIN TRUTH®

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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

Closer Than You Know

By Greg Albrecht

"God could not be everywhere and therefore he made mothers."

—Rudyard Kipling

The mother and her children were on a ship filled with starving people. The captain of the ship saw this mother and her two children, and moved by compassion he gave her one of the few pieces of bread left on that ship. Without a second thought, the mother tore the piece of bread in two, and gave the two pieces to her children while taking none for herself.

As Victor Hugo tells this story, he has a deckhand standing near the captain as they both witness this mother's extraordinary self-sacrificial love.

Amazed by the fact that the woman hadn't even taken one bite of the piece of bread for herself, the sailor asked the captain "Is it because she is not hungry, Captain?"

The captain replied, "No, it is because she is a mother."

Perhaps God made mothers to give us the experience of a kind of love in which a child, the recipient of a mother's love, will not or cannot reciprocate love in the same way and degree the mother can.

We cannot ever pay back our mother sufficiently, and that lesson in a physical relationship is exactly what we must realize when it comes to the love God has for us. Thanksgiving and gratitude, yes—payback no, impossible. Can't be done.

The Mother Who Births our Soul

Julian of Norwich (1343-approx. 1416), whose name causes some to assume she was a man, is credited with being the first woman to write a book in the English language.

Julian was way ahead of her time in her insistence that divine love is like motherly love—she spoke of God as both our mother and our father. Writing some 600 years ago, she said that the bond between a mother and a child is the only earthly relationship that truly illustrates the relationship a person can have with Jesus.

She completely disagreed with the popular conception of a God whose wrath causes pain in our lives, a father who delights in teaching us lessons through our suffering...and of course, sadly, that same misunderstanding of God holds sway in our world today.

Julian of Norwich once said, in terms of the mistaken idea of God's wrath, *"I saw no wrath except on man's side, and He [God] forgives that in us, for wrath is nothing but a perversity and an opposition to peace and love."*

Here's a brief excerpt from her book, *Revelations of Divine Love*, which serves as an example of her perception of Jesus and how he, as God in the flesh, embodied divine, mother's love:

Our true mother, Jesus, he who is all love...sustains us within himself in love and was in labour for the full time until he suffered the sharpest pangs and the

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most grievous sufferings that ever were or shall be, and at the last he died. And when it was finished...he had born us...

The mother can give her child her milk to suck, but our dear mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and he does so most generously and most tenderly...

This fair, lovely word "mother," it is so sweet and so tender it is most truly said of him... the birth of our body is only low, humble and modest compared to the birth of our soul...and it is Jesus who does it...

All the debt we owe, at God's bidding, for his fatherhood and motherhood, is fulfilled by loving God truly; a blessed love which Christ arouses in us."

This Christ-centered lady wrote of the life and ministry of Jesus in the light of what we know as a mother's love. In a similar way as God, through Isaiah, explained his transcendent love for us, far beyond the greatness of a mortal mother's love.

Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the

child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! —Isaiah 49:15

Our earthly mothers birth us—they bring us into this world—and through their labor and the sacrifice of their bodies, they give birth to our lives that will one day end in death. But "Mother" Jesus births us to eternal life that never ends.

When it comes to understanding the love of God, there is really no better metaphor or comparison than to say that God loves us like a mother loves her children.

Our physical, earthly mothers are not and were not perfect, of course—and in a few cases they seemed not to care. But in the vast majority of cases, mothers care, they love and they are filled with self-sacrifice for their children.

The story is told of Thomas Edison who was sent home from school as a young boy with a note from his teacher. The note to Thomas Edison's mother said, "Your son is dumb. We can't do anything for him." Mrs. Edison wrote back, "You do not

understand my boy. I will teach him myself."

Mrs. Edison did teach the young Thomas Edison herself—and the rest is, as they say, history.

Seven Buses

In 2010 Gregory Boyle wrote his memoir, *Tattoos on the Heart*, based on his ministry as a priest in Pico Aliso—a depressed area of grinding poverty in Los Angeles, inhabited by a predominantly Latino population. Pico Aliso is dominated by gangs, identified by their tattoos.

The title of his book, *Tattoos on the Heart*, has a powerful subtitle that informs the reader about the direction of his book. The subtitle reads "*The Power of Boundless Compassion.*" Gregory Boyle is using the omnipresent tattoos of gangs to illustrate the deeper and far more meaningful spiritual tattoo on our hearts.

Here's a brief excerpt from the first chapter of *Tattoos on the Heart* as Gregory Boyle talked about his ministry to and relationship with one particular young teenage boy

named Rigo. Rigo had been arrested and placed in a county detention center in Glendora, a suburb some 28 miles northeast of Rigo's home in Pico Aliso.

Father Boyle had gone to visit Rigo and was talking with him in the gym before Mass about his family:

Rigo...remembered one day when he got into trouble at school—he was in fourth grade and he got sent home early from school and he dreaded going home to report what had happened.

"When I got home, my jefito [a Spanish idiom for Dad or boss] was there. He was hardly ever there. My dad says, 'Why they send you home?'



**God's love is greater.
Greater than any love
we will ever know,
including that of our
mother for us.**



And cuz my dad always beat me, I said, 'If I tell you, promise you won't hit me?' He just said, 'I'm your father. Course I'm not going to hit you.' So I told him.

Rigo can't continue talking right away—he breaks down in tears. He starts to wail, rocking back and forth, so I put my arm around him. When he is finally able to speak, and barely so, he says, 'He beat me with a pipe... with a pipe!'

When Rigo composes himself I ask him about his mother. He pointed to the other side of the gym, where a tiny woman has just walked in. 'That's her over there.' He pauses for a beat. 'There's no one else like her. I've been locked up for more than a year and a half. She comes to see me every Sunday. You know how many buses she take every Sunday—to see my sorry ass?'

Then he breaks down in tears again—and once again it takes him a while to regain his composure—finally, gasping between his tears he says, 'Seven buses...she takes...seven... buses. Imagine.'"

To understand why Rigo's mother had to take seven buses to travel 28 miles from her home in Pico Aliso to a teenage detention center in Glendora to visit her son it helps to understand how inadequate and inefficient the public bus service in greater Los Angeles is.

You can get most places on a bus operated by the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, but because the routes are so convoluted and confusing, if you are going very far you will need to get off a bus, transfer to another bus, and so on—sometimes a number of times. It can take several hours to arrive at your destination. **Rigo's mother took seven buses, once a week, to visit her son.**

Closer to You Than the Dirt Under Your Fingernails

Father Greg Boyle explains the obvious lesson. No matter how far away we are. No matter what we have done. No matter how long it

will take him, God will always come after us, visit us and be with us. He will take seven buses and more. He will "travel" as far and as long as it takes.

After telling this story of Rigo and his mother in his book, *Tattoos on the Heart—The Power of Boundless Compassion*, Father Greg Boyle concludes:

In Spanish, when you speak of your great friend, you describe the union and kinship as being 'de una y mugre'—our friendship is like the fingernail and the dirt under it...The desire of God's heart is immeasurably larger than our imaginations can conjure.

My friends, dear readers, God's love is greater. Greater than

any love we will ever know, including the greatest love, that of our mother for us. He will take seven or more buses, whatever it takes, to be with us.

Celebrating and giving thanks for our earthly parents on Mother's Day and on Father's Day gives us a rare opportunity to take a glimpse into the vast gap between heaven and earth—and how that God goes to any lengths to travel between eternity and mortality.

In Christ, God came (and still does!) from outside time and space so that he might be "inside" our time and space, like Rigo's mother took those seven buses to visit him "inside" where he was doing time as a captive of his time and space.

As we give thanks for all that mothers are—as we remember the self-sacrifice and service our own mother gave us, may we come to a deeper insight into the divine love of God for each of us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. □