

FROM JUVENILE HALL TO CITY HALL



Scripture:

Psalm 100

¹Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. ²Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing.

³Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

⁴Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name.

⁵For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

Philippians 4:4-9

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



Guest Speaker Bio: Salvador “Pocho” Sanchez-Strawbridge was born into a family of innovation, tremendous work ethic, and self-determination. His parents were union organizers for the United Farm Workers. While his parents in his words were out “saving the world,” he started to feel disgruntled about his circumstances of poverty and personal trauma. These feelings, along with a worsening identity crises [due to his mixed racial heritage] helped cause him to join a street gang. With the help from his family, he eventually began to transform himself into a viable upstanding man of his community. He is presently finishing up his master thesis at the University of Southern California. He also has come back to his hometown of Santa Rosa where at one time he used to terrorize his community; now he serves his city. As he says, “I went from Juvenile Hall to City Hall.” He is presently the Community Outreach Specialist for the City of Santa Rosa Violence Prevention Partnership at City Hall.

Pastor Cindy's introduction:

On page one you will find my favorite scripture in the whole Bible. We need to obey these commands more than ever to promote peace in the world and in our own souls. Let's read it in unison. (See Philippians 4:4-9 above.)

I am thankful to God for Thanksgiving. I love this time of year when we are encouraged to focus on what we are grateful for. I am grateful that we have Salvador Sanchez-Strawbridge here with us today. I met Sal when his team came from the City of Santa Rosa Gang Violence Prevention Program to observe our Montgomery High School Breakfast Program and see if it was deserving of a grant. They all agreed that our breakfast helps prevent teens from getting involved with violence in this region. So \$5,000.00 was granted to our church to help sustain our breakfast program. Thank you very much for your part in that decision, Sal!

When I heard Sal's inspirational life story I asked him if he would come and share it with you all. So here he is! We are thankful for your presence with us today.

Let's watch a youtube video that introduces Sal and then he will continue in person to share his testimony.

(The following was transcribed by Carole Michel from a cassette tape made at the time of Sal's talk to the congregation of Church of the Roses.)

From the video about "Pocho" and Home Boy Industries:

Interviewer: "Pocho" Sanchez is an artist."

Sal: I've been a people watcher my whole life and I always wanted to express myself but I was never good at drawing or anything like that.

Interviewer: But he found something he was good at.

Sal: I started to see how much power there is in an image. You can take back your voice through photography.

Interviewer: And that power has a special resonance here at Home Boy Industries.

Home Boy Rep.: You're always trying to put a human face on an enormously complex social dilemma.

Interviewer: That dilemma is the way people see gang members, gang members who come here to take their lives back.

Home Boy Rep.: When you have pictures of enemies laughing together, it liberates them to conjure up an image because that's part of the problem, some sort of imagination.

Interviewer: That's Pocho's job here, to capture those images and put them out there for the world to see.

Home Boy Rep.: He has captured me on a couple of different occasions. He has a real gift. Anybody can take a picture, but it's about capturing the moment.

Interviewer: Capturing moments of people who have never been photographed this way.

Home Boy Rep.: People on Facebook are liking it and thousands of viewers are looking at it and positive comments are given off. It allows the individuals to start seeing themselves differently from what they saw their whole lives.

Interviewer: That's his other job: putting these images on social media through his Facebook page, "The Real Humans of L.A." Sound familiar?

Sal: I was really inspired by the "Humans in New York."

Interviewer: A very popular website that showed the everyday lives of New Yorkers. He was inspired but felt he could take it further.

Sal: I wanted to counter how people are just focused on Hollywood or Silver Lake or Van Nuys or Brentwood. I wanted to show the real, you know what I see everyday. I lived in Boyle Heights, in East Los Angeles and to me that's the real L.A.

Interviewer: The real L.A. that was home for him when he had no other home to turn to.

Sal: At a very young age I felt abandoned by my parents and I didn't understand why they weren't at the house taking care of me. From the community there was a gang, so that gang embraced me. They didn't care about what color I was, my last name, whatever. We don't have psychiatrists, we have liquor stores.

Interviewer: So at the young age of twelve, Pocho was lost.

Sal: Sex, drugs, alcohol and gangs and violence started at a very young age for me. I got away from it all and I moved down to Santa Monica and went to Santa Monica College.

Interviewer: Sal realized the value of education, but that wasn't enough to turn his life around.

Sal: I thought that just because I left my area that I was going to leave everything behind. But my behavior and my alcoholism followed me.

Interviewer: After years in a gang surrounded by violence, drinking and drugs, Pocho found his way here at Home Boy. He didn't just find a job, he found recovery; he found not only sobriety, but a purpose.

Sal: My favorite thing is having a Home Boy sit down, taking a picture of him, putting it on Facebook and seeing how the whole world reacts to him in a positive way. You have to remember they have never seen themselves in a positive light.

Interviewer: Carlos Lisiago just finished serving a thirteen year sentence. He says that Pocho's photos were good for him and good for his community.

Sal: It makes us see another side of us that we don't see ourselves, you know. People come here and have a lot more respect for what people think, and it's like family.

Interviewer: The Facebook page, "Real Humans of L.A.," is a site for any photographer or anyone who wants to tell a story.

Sal: You go outside and look into L.A. and it's all the color you can think of and that's beautiful.

Interviewer: Beautiful, for the subject and for the photographer.

Sal: My photography saved my life; my story-telling saved my life.

Interviewer: Life: a word that has a whole new meaning.



SAL'S TALK TO THE CONGREGATION

First just let me start off with a prayer. Heavenly Father, thank you for letting me be here today. I'm full of gratitude to be here in this space worshipping you and let me speak from my heart and from my truth. Blessings be to you. Amen

All right! Thank you very much for letting me be here. As you see, I was in Los Angeles for about thirteen years. It was a great and amazing period in my life, but I believe God

brought me home. I grew up in the South Park community in Santa Rosa by the Fair Grounds. Actually, I also lived down the street here for a while, too. It's very ironic. When I was talking with the pastor, I was telling her how ironic it was that I was coming back to – God is great – I was coming back to see if we were going to fund the program here. I was one of the kids who used to smoke marijuana outside in the little hallway that you guys have on the side right before school started. That used to be

fifteen years ago. I don't know who was around then.

Every morning before high school there would be a whole group of kids there, smoking, drinking, doing whatever. Now you have created this program where they are eating, you know, feeding their bodies and socializing and going to school because a lot of kids go to school with an empty stomach. And we all know that it's hard to focus when you're hungry.

So that's really ironic but it's beautiful and that just shows you the glory of God and when you start following God what happens in your life.

I'm going to tell you a little bit about how I grew up, a little bit about how I found God, and what I'm doing now if that's okay with you.

ABOUT MY BACKGROUND

I'm half Irish and half Mexican. Somebody said, "Oh, you're a green bean!" I thought that was hilarious. My mom's from El Paso, Texas and my dad's from Birmingham, Alabama and they are both social justice activists. I was born in Oxnard, CA. My parents worked the Strawberry Strike with the United Farm Workers. My mom was on the law team with Cesar Chavez. She went to the school of law at Hastings. She grew up very poor, didn't know English until she was twelve, but got straight A's because her family was very serious about getting the American Dream. It seems like she got it.

My father was also very poor, grew up in an Irish family in Birmingham, Alabama and also was frustrated with being poor. He became an activist in the Civil Rights struggle and eventually got kicked out of Alabama for his work in Civil Rights and a lot of stuff he was doing, and it brought him to California. Jerry Brown, the first time he was governor, actually

saved him from extradition because he was breaking people out of prisons. He was a lawyer and he could do all kind of stuff and it was pretty amazing some of the stories he told me. But the sixties were a tense time.

So I grew up in that. My mom was a very narrow nationalist Chicana who thought white people were the reincarnation of the devil. It's so funny. She said, "God got me! I fell in love with an Irish southerner." So they met in that struggle. My dad was working with the California Labor with the state and he was supposed to be the negotiator between the growers and the workers. He was actually with the workers. She was translating for him and she looked over and said, "I'm not going to work with this guy. If he wants to work with us, he'd better learn Spanish." Eventually, Cesar Chavez directed her that she should do it or be off the law team. And so she was working with him and she finally focused on him, and my dad looked straight at her and she walked out of the room and said, "Oh my God, that's the most beautiful looking white boy I have ever seen in my life!"

So from there on, they fell in love. She learned that they had more in common because of how they grew up. My dad grew up on mayonnaise sandwiches and she grew up on butter and tortillas. So that was what united them and she started to understand that we are all human. Even with all our differences, it just doesn't matter.

WE MOVED TO SANTA ROSA

We moved up here to work the grapes. What happened with me is that both my parents have law degrees. If you go downtown, on the wall of the Press Democrat, there are images of Jack London and others. My dad loves that my mom is on that wall. She is part of the fifty people that shaped Sonoma County history,

working with women, immigrants, the community, all kinds of different things. She's the president of the first bi-lingual radio station in the country.

So we moved up here, but how did I get into a gang, right? I think it's kind of amazing, too. But it just shows you that gangs are a reaction to poverty, but it's really wrap around services for any kids that don't have something. It gives you that false sense that is based on conditional love.

Now Home Boy Industries is wrap-around services based on unconditional love. I'm a relentless love; I'm going to love you no matter what, because no matter what you do, I'm going to love you. I will always be in your corner no matter what you do. Father Greg Boyle stands with people that have murdered people, every kind of person. He says that it is an amazing thing to watch your children kill each other because he was working in these communities where people were going to war with each other. But it is about compassion, about kinship. You will be tested about whether you truly have unconditional love for your partner, for your family, for your kids. And once we start cheating the community, like our children, then _____. No matter what your kid does, you're always going to love them, right? What about those kids that we kind of just conditionally love – only when you're doing good we'll love you. But what about when they're doing something wrong?

GROWING UP

So when I was growing up, they would say Salvatore Sanchez-Strawbridge; they would say my name. The white kids would say that he has a unique name, but he has brown skin (it's like green and all kinds of colors now [tattoos]). And the Mexicans would be like: well, he's brown like us but he has a funny last name. So every day they would make fun of me. When they would do that it would create anger in me, because I didn't know who I was. So I'd start to hold that anger in, feel it. You start to lose your innocence especially when you're young; it's hard to lose your innocence in that way when you already have anger in your heart.

And so that happened, and also my parents were out there saving the world. I always say that the revolution starts in the house. You have to take care of your kids; you can't be out there doing that.

Then my grandma passed away and she was very religious and she was like my mother, she was my stability. For me, I'm sitting with two of my home-boys and one of them is shooting dope, doing drugs with his parents who were on drugs. The other one is from an immigrant family and his parents are working two jobs, three jobs; they're not home, they're not present. And my parents are helping those people in the community, but they are also not present.

So the streets were present, right? So at the ripe age of twelve years old, I joined a gang. At fifteen, I was one of the ones who joined an adult gang in South Park. Through that, I would, to make a long story short, get cut up a little bit growing up.

If you don't have a connection with the Lord, you're going to put other things in there, false prophets, right? So I put in gangs. It gave me identity: I'm a Norteño. Boom! It gave me womanizing, ego, edging God out – I had a nick-name, I was somebody!

The kids, the Mexicans and the whites, shut up once I joined the neighborhood gang.

GOING TO COLLEGE

It gave me all these things, but no matter what, I walked away to go to college. Actually my friends were very supportive of me going to college. There is this false narrative that do or die, but in or but out, or you can never get out or they'll try to kill you. That is not true. I don't know anybody, besides getting in trouble with the gang, like there are certain rules like you can't speak with people under age, or somebody's wife. But besides breaking these major rules, if you want to go to college, it's fine to go to college. They were seriously

supportive of me going to college. I walked freely in my community. To this day they are proud of me on top of it. I work with kids that were supposedly the rivals, so it's not that way.

FILLING THE VOID IN MY HEART

So I was filling myself with all these things to fill that void that I had in my heart. Being with God is like drinking fresh orange juice, you know squeezed fresh, just getting that connection, and I never knew. Before, I was drinking orange soda, walking around this earth deluded, because when you put marijuana, alcohol, drugs, womanizing, all these vices in between you and God, you're walking around watered down, you're walking around deluded. And I never knew – I grew up – twelve years old, imagine, right when you're going to be a teenager, when you're making that transition, with the hormones and all that stuff, I turned straight from a kid into an adult, but I kind of skipped a stage and I didn't get that connection because when my grandma died I felt a lot of hate. Now I understand that God doesn't give us all these things because he's mad; he gives us the power to be able to withhold it all, to be able to take it all, to handle anything. My father has cancer right now. He has prostate cancer, and luckily they caught it. But if something happens, I'm still going to be okay. Before I would have broken down, but because I'm connected now, I have a connection – boom – it's in. Before, when anything would happen, the whole world was over, and I was going to make more things on top of that. You know, you get one problem and it snowballs into another problem, and that's how you see people live dysfunctional lives because they're not connected.

COURAGE FROM ALCOHOL

Alcohol, for me, worked. I remember the first time I had a drink of alcohol, it was like ah, I was home. I could dance, I had the courage to do anything. Eventually, it stopped working. Eventually I would go to Los Angeles. I thought a lot of drinking was in gangs, but if you're in a fraternity it's a whole other situation. So I eventually got a Master's

degree from the University of Southern California, I'm a Trojan – fight on! I had it all! I had the UCLA professor wife, it was all good. We lived in South Pasadena, we had a Mercedes, I had celebrity friends, I was a well known photographer in Los Angeles. And eventually I got this job at Home Boy Industries as a senior staff. I became senior staff, junior staff, and then senior staff. I was a service provider then I started getting services and I went back to senior staff.

One of my most proud moments is when I was cleaning and taking the trash out of my old office and it was very humbling, but that is what happens: you have to humble yourself.

I'll tell you a couple of stories and then I'll end.

I WAS DYING INSIDE

I was taking a picture of this gang member. This guy did twenty-five years in prison, no education, no kids, nothing. You would think he has nothing. I have a Master's degree from an advanced great university, I have travelled to twenty-seven countries, celebrity friends, really well known, a beautiful gorgeous wife who is well educated and I live in one of the most prominent communities in Los Angeles and I am dying inside. And he is okay with himself. He has a bus pass, he's living life. Have you ever seen somebody that they're just good with themselves, they know who they are? So I just couldn't understand. I'm supposed to be happy. We're all from Santa Rosa, a big city; but no, I wasn't happy.

So eventually I couldn't live with the contradictions that I was living; eventually I was just sick and tired. I eventually went to re-hab and they helped me follow Jesus and I went to sober living.

I want to say two more things. I was sitting in my bunk in rehab and I was thirty-three, Jesus' age, so every year after thirty-three I'm good! Blessings!

So, I was sitting in my bunk and thinking that I'm thirty years old and I'm in rehab at the Salvation Army in Santa Monica, this and that. I realized that every time you go into darkness, if you go into gratitude it really can take you out of that. So I was like, no, hold on, you can change your thinking.

There is a picture of a guy up there with a cross when he got the blessing; he used to have tattooed devil horns on his head. Imagine what had to go on in his head to make that commitment – both ways.

So I'm thirty, I'm doing something with my life, I'm not forty, I have a Master's degree. These guys have no Master's degrees. My family and my work are supportive. They have no support. If they mess up in this program, they go back to prison; if I mess up I lose a job. I was actually confronting my demons. I said, "Listen God, you have to do something. I need something."

**So I got on my knees and I said,
"Take me. You drive;
I'll get in the passenger seat.
Let's roll. Take me, do something.
I need you to take the
thirst from me."**

**I asked him to take the thirst of
alcoholism because I did everything,
but I'm half Mexican and I like to
drink. So he took that from me.
And literally, it was a hard battle.**

I went back to work and they said as I told you that I was in the junior staff now, since I was in the program, but I got to do a lot of healing. I did therapy, I did anger management, all these things, and I got to just humble myself. I thought I was this big popular dude, but I'm just like everybody else. So that whole journey kept going, and things happened. I did a lot of damage that I had to confront. I had to restore justice. Restorative justice is one of the most amazing things that anybody can do and be part of.

BAPTIZED

Two weeks ago, I just got baptized as a Christian. If you would have told me a couple of years ago that I was going to go hit that water, I would have not even laughed at you. I just wouldn't even have talked to you about it because it wasn't something I thought would have happened. (I had so many church wounds I can't tell you.) But it's kind of like when you fall in love. It's just: Boom, it's got you. You just have to deal with it because you know you're in love. It's on! And so God moved on me, Jesus moved on me and it's been like that ever since. I came home, which is amazing, just like this thing is amazing where I'm speaking to you when I used to smoke weed and loiter in your parking lot. It's surreal, but that's how amazing God can be when you start walking with him.

CINCO DE MAYO GANG FIGHT

Fifteen years ago, there was a gang fight, a big one, on Cinco de Mayo: fifty young people and a bunch of shootings. It was amazing and crazy and I was in that fight. A friend got shot right next to me and another friend shot somebody else and it was in Santa Rosa and it happened. Everybody was like, we can't arrest our way out of this situation. We need some real healing and real service. So they started the Violence Prevention Partnership, a city agency that works with seventy-five partners to wrap around our children and give every kind of service you can think of – the police, the fire, mental health, everything you can think of – SAY down the street, Social Advocates for Youth – we fund all these different groups. So fifteen years later, who would have thought that the kid that was in that gang fight would be the person that is kind of the face of the agency that they created because of the fight I was in. That just shows you how amazing God is and how amazing it is that I went from Juvenile Hall to City Hall.

I don't think that I'm extra special. I just think that God moves and when he moves, amazing things happen. I'm still working on it; like the Jesus thing is a little hard on me. I'm a

highly educated person and I know history. I have issues with colonization and this and that and I have all this in my head, this mind stuff. You've got to be careful, especially when you read too many books. Those are books written by adults and whatever happens with people using the church in ways that might not have been the right way, it doesn't matter. The Word is the Word. I feel like I have just been following my heart and the mind says so many things all day long, but your heart is what speaks, right? And it has moved me to get baptized and moved me to feel comfortable in churches and with church folks and I feel good, and I'm happy and I'm blessed.

I still sin, but my sins I don't think are as deep; they don't hurt me as deeply. When you sin, you really hurt yourself. I think my sins are kind of simple sins and some things I'm kind of working on. I'm not making those deep wounds on myself any more and that's what is beautiful. Every night I can hit my knees and forgive myself, first of all, but I ask God to forgive me because when I walk with him another day – for me it's a twenty-four hour program.

I'm just really grateful to be here with you all and thank you very much. And God bless you.



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