

Touch Your Neighbor

12-2-2012

Luke 2: 1-7

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to his own town to register. 4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

You all know the old saying, Time flies when you're having fun. Well, I think we need to get out our calendars and study them. Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and time is moving much too quickly. It seems like Labor Day was just two or three days ago. Thanksgiving was just yesterday, Christmas will be tomorrow, and April 15th, you know tax season, is just around the corner. Speaking of Advent, Christmas, and taxes, I recently came across several Christmas carols that sound like they have been re-titled by those people who write the IRS tax codes. See if you can recognize these carols by their new names. If so, go ahead and call it out the real name. Ready, OK, here we go. Nocturnal Quietude (Silent Night); Listen, the Celestial Beings Lyrically Vocalize (Hark, the Herald Angels Sing); Exuberance Designed for the Orbiting Sphere on Which Resides Humanity (Joy to the World); Inquiring of the Virgin's Newborn Identity (What Child Is This?); An Arrival at Twenty-four-Hundred Hours during an Absence of Atmospheric Activity (It Came upon a Midnight Clear).

We may not usually think of taxes during Advent, but remember, the context of Jesus' birth 2,000 years ago had to do with the taxation of the Roman Empire. Caesar Augustus wasn't seeking the nomination for president. When you read his lips, it wasn't "No new taxes!" Quite to the contrary, it was more like "Bleed those turnips more!" Every adult male was required to return to the town of his birth to take part in a census that would, in turn, be used as a tax roll.

The familiar words of our Scripture lesson don't go into excessive detail. They leave a lot of room to read between the lines. And that's what I'd like to do with you this morning, you know, read between the lines. We don't know the name of the innkeeper in Bethlehem, but he probably had a lot in common with the other innkeepers in town. Motel row was in chaos that night. The manager of the local Motel 6 had difficulty leaving his light on because of the constant traffic of those coming into town to register for the senseless census. The desk clerk at the Holiday Inn was writing a memo to his corporate office, requesting that the hotel be renamed. There was no way a visit to Bethlehem at this time could be considered a holiday. For the hotel guests and the staff, the riotous response to Caesar's self-serving edict was anything but a vacation. Somehow, Holiday Inn or Holiday Inn Express, didn't sound right. Pardon the pun, but this was a "taxing" situation. Those with rooms for rent were all in the same boat. And those who were coming into town in need of a place to stay, all had the same needs, a warm bed, a roof overhead, and slice of cheese and bread. As Mary and Joseph made their way toward Bethlehem, they could smell the fragrance of fresh baked bread. Actually, in Hebrew Bethlehem means "house of bread."

Well, as it turned out, they were turned down. "No vacancy" signs were hanging everywhere. Not a single bed was in sight that night. But, Mary and Joseph were not turned out on their ear. An unnamed innkeeper, sensitive to the obvious need of this couple from the country, came to their rescue. He led them to an outdoor shelter for livestock, where they could be shielded from

the wind and where, in the end, the baby would be cradled in a straw-lined feeding trough. Now, before you speculate about the innkeeper's generosity (or lack of it), I'd encourage you to consider the context. Give the guy a break. I believe he deserves the benefit of the doubt. If his motel was indeed maxed out, what other options did he have? I am impressed by the fact that he went out of his way to welcome Mary and Joseph into his life (as stressed-out as it certainly was). No doubt, the innkeeper, having been tutored in the proverbs of Solomon, was responding to the needs of these travelers because of his faith. **"He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and He will reward him for what he has done" (Prov. 19:17).** What we do for others is, in essence, a kindness done to God. Isn't that curious? That sounds an awful lot like Jesus' parable about the Sheep and Goats in Matthew 25. It's where He challenges the way we respond to people whose circumstances are different than our own. It's where Jesus basically says, whoever visits the prisoner, clothes the naked, shelters the homeless, feeds the hungry, has done the same to me.

Christmas is a season of the year when we are gift-conscious. We shop and buy and wrap and give, sometime by spending what we need to live. All the while, some gifts we get are ones we would just as soon forget. We stand in line to take them back, and there in line ahead of us is Cousin Jack. His gift to me is in my hand, and no matter how I try to stand, I can't conceal it. He can see the fate of what he gave to me. But then I spy what he returns; my costly gift he freely returns. How senseless it now seems to me, the fuss we make of gifts. Do you agree? If all we do is take them back, then wrap them in a paper sack. It would be funny if it weren't half true. So much of what we spend our money on is either not needed or not fully appreciated. Okay, so maybe that's an overstatement. But hear me. If Christmas is Jesus' birthday, then why aren't we more preoccupied with the gifts we give Him?

One of the reasons is because we get caught up in the frantic busyness of this season and get our eyes off the Christ of Christmas. Starting today, I want us to experience a Christ-centered Advent and Christmas season that focuses on Jesus Christ. I hope it results in us being more thoughtful in the kind of gifts we give each other and especially more thoughtful in what we give to Christ. Now, back to the innkeeper. His example shows us the kind of gifts Jesus enjoys. When we give of ourselves to people in need, we are giving real gifts to the Lord. That Bethlehem bed-and-breakfast proprietor didn't know that his responsiveness to Mary and Joseph was actually ministering to Jesus. But, he did it anyway. Because of Jesus' teaching, we have reason to believe making room for others is a means of directly serving him. Most of our neighbors aren't homeless, but, so many of them have needs. Like that night in Bethlehem, some of the words we could choose to describe people on our block at this time of year would be busy, exhausted, or maybe even confused. Unlike Mary and Joseph, most our neighbors do not need a place to sleep. However, they may be in need of a place where they can rest from the turmoil of a relentless holiday regimen. They are in need of the "touch of Christmas" unlike they've felt in a long time, if ever. They are in need of a touch of hospitality in which they feel the welcoming embrace of a loving God.

Several years ago many Christians across the country were challenged to see their homes as Lighthouses of prayer in their neighborhoods. In other words, it means viewing your home as a place where God's people pray regularly for those nearby who are lost in a sea of spiritual and emotional peril. You know as well as I do the kind of struggles some of the people who live near you are dealing with: depression, alcoholism, parents with Alzheimer's disease, terminal illness, unemployment, divorce, children with ADD, runaway teens. The bottom line is that people around us need us. They need a touch that can serve as a conduit for the healing grace of God. Many times, it's a conduit only we can provide. As you pray for and then develop authentic relationships with the people you live around, the love of God will shine out like a comforting beam that provides direction to the harbor of salvation. Whether or not you've thought of your

home as a lighthouse in your neighborhood, there are specific ways you can follow in the footsteps of the innkeeper by expressing self-giving hospitality. Here are a few suggestions and you may come up with some other great ideas.

First, cook a meal for a neighbor, especially if it's a neighbor you don't know very well. Let them know it is just a small token of Christ's love for everyone and as a Christian, you are sharing that love with them. Let them know you would like to get to know them better. Make a connection with a neighbor.

Second, for adults and older kids: Okay. So you are like everyone else in our overscheduled society. You don't know your neighbors. Make a Christmas apology! Say right up-front in a note of invitation: "I realize I haven't been a good neighbor. Like many others, I have been preoccupied, but I would like to take this Christmas season and get to know some folk who live nearby." Then invite neighbors to a Christmas breakfast. However you want to organize this is up to you. The point is to make connections.

Here's one that I really get excited about. It invites us to host a neighborhood Christmas party in Jesus' honor. Basically, it means inviting neighbors you know and don't know, who may know the Lord, or not, to a "Christmas" get-together at your home. It can be a covered-dish supper where everybody signs up to bring something. Or, and Maggie would love this one, maybe it could be covered-dish dessert buffet. At the party, you can sing some carols and share favorite Christmas traditions or memories. If you think it appropriate, you could invite someone who knows the Lord to share how the true meaning of Christmas has shaped their life. Like I said, I get excited just thinking about the evangelistic potential contained in a neighborhood Christmas party. The truth is, something like this doesn't need to be a big production to be a huge success.

Touching our neighbors through acts of friendship, grounded prayer, care, and sharing are tangible means by which we experience the Christmas touch. Making Christ-like connections during the holidays is a way we can express our gratitude for a hospitable God who reached out to us in our loneliness and invited us into his heart. When we open the doors of our homes to people both old and young, who are dying for meaningful companionship, we let the Lord in, too. At the Bethlehem inn there may not have been a room for Christ, but this Christmas season, you can host a neighborhood gathering in his honor.

My prayer is that this Christmas season, you take advantage of this opportunity to "touch your neighbors" with the love of God through Jesus Christ by sharing your home and perhaps your lives with them.
