

"HONOR THE OVERLOOKED"
by Rom A. Pegram (12/10/17)

A few years ago, there were some newspaper headlines around Christmas time that I won't soon forget! They read, "Bethlehem Cancels Christmas Celebration!" I never thought, in my lifetime, I would read such headlines! *After years of planning & untold dollars spent, major celebrations planned for the first Christmas of the new millennium were scrapped.* The risk for tourists and Christian pilgrims wanting to make their way to the City of David were just too high—tensions between peoples living in Israel being ever-present! Streets were deserted. Shops were closed. Unlike that first Christmas, the inns or hotels in Bethlehem remained empty...

But, in the midst of these millennial events, what the newspapers failed to mention was ... *the plight of the Palestinian Christians in Bethlehem* (and I have both friends who are Palestinian Christians and friends who are Jews in Israel—and they are friends with each other). But regarding this particular Christmas season, let me say ... ***the marginalized or 'overlooked' of the world rarely get the headlines.*** They were dependent on tourism to market their olive wood figurines and other souvenirs, as they struggled to make ends meet in the birthplace of *their* Savior. And, they had no choice but to depend on God's mercy for this particular year! For a long time, they'd lived with the uncertainty of political unrest & the unstable economy that goes with it ... but, *Christmas 2000 was worse than any time in their recent memory.* Tragically, these Palestinian Christians were forced to sell furniture and family heirlooms in order to buy food to feed their children, to keep their lives going, and so forth. Yet, *this didn't make the headlines! Not exactly the sentimental scene pictured on greeting cards, is it?*

So, what about those who are 'overlooked' in *our* society? What's *our* responsibility to them ... as believers in Jesus Christ? Sometimes, the overlooked in our communities are about as marginalized as the first century shepherds who tended sheep on the hills around Bethlehem some two thousand years ago...

You see, in Jesus' day, *shepherds didn't count for much!* They certainly weren't white collar ... and, believe it or not, they weren't even considered blue collar. As a matter of fact, *they had no collars;* they had no status! They were definitely the 'overlooked' of their society. Unlike David, their chances of tending their father's sheep, then growing up to become king, were fairly remote...

No wonder it was unthinkable that God would choose these who were 'overlooked'—these *shepherds* ... to receive the first announcement of the arrival of the Messiah. But, God was making an awesome statement, wasn't he? ***Nobodys are somebodys to God!*** Now, listen carefully as we hear more about them (Luke 2:8-20, NLT)...

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. ⁹ Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, ¹⁰ but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. ¹¹

The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! ¹² And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.” ¹³ Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.” ¹⁵ When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, “Let’s go to Bethlehem! Let’s see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” ¹⁶ They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. ¹⁷ After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. ¹⁸ All who heard the shepherds’ story were astonished, ¹⁹ but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. ²⁰ The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.

You better believe people were amazed! And *it wasn’t what the shepherds had to say* that left the crowds amazed; it was the fact the shepherds were *the ones* who were bringing such eternally important news! *Of all the people* in the world that God could have chosen for such an important assignment ... *why shepherds?*

Well, there’s a principle at work here, if you’ve noticed it. *God intentionally chose the shepherds as those initially entrusted with the message of Jesus’ birth.* It wasn’t a random choice! And ... **by having the angels tell them, God was honoring their worth!** Folks, *we’ve been called to do the same thing* ... during this Christmas season and beyond—to share the good news with **everyone** ... therefore letting **everyone** know—*regardless of social status*—that **they are somebody to God!** So what do we need to do ... in light of our Bible story for today? First:

WE NEED TO FOCUS ON & INTENTIONALLY REACH OUT TO THE OVERLOOKED IN OUR WORLD! Again, when we share the Good News of *why* Jesus was born, with the marginalized or ‘overlooked’ in our society, *we validate their worth in God’s sight!* Paying attention to the *overlooked* or *undervalued* in our society is one way *we can be Christ* to others! When we honor the ‘shepherds’ of our culture, by sharing with them the secrets of God’s love, we honor God by following *his* lead...

That’s what Jesus did; he hung out with the outcasts! And, get this: **When Jesus attempted to draw a picture of himself and his purpose in coming to this earth, what illustration did he use? A SHEPHERD**—a deliberate identification with *the scourge of society* ... and, quite frankly, that’s what Jesus wants from us, too! He says: *focus* on the overlooked in our society, too!

In Matthew 25, it basically says ... that *we’ll be held accountable for the way we respond to the ‘overlooked’ in society?* In that scripture, Jesus is *so identified* with the marginalized that he says when we reach out to them, we’re really reaching out to HIM!

That's a lesson many I've taken on mission trips, over the years, have learned. One year, coming back from a mission trip to Eastern Tennessee, where we'd worked with the 'overlooked' all week, we stopped in Indianapolis for lunch just off the interstate. Because our kids had been so focused on the 'overlooked' of society all week long, they hadn't yet readjusted their focus back to what would (unfortunately) be considered 'normal.' After lunch, one youth happened to notice some cardboard boxes up under one of the overpasses not far from the restaurant. They came and asked us adults about those boxes. After a moment, we explained to them that that was probably a small community of homeless people—those who'd been marginalized somehow and were now taking up residence under that bridge...

Immediately, the kids begged us ... to spend their last dollars—dollars they were saving for their last meal on the road—to make a difference in yet someone else's life. With an adult escort, we allowed them to buy the food they wanted to buy; then, they went over, climbed up the embankment ... and offered their gift of love to those who lived in the cardboard boxes. They were shocked at what they saw. One man, in particular, was down on his luck—an attorney who'd just gone through a divorce, lost his home, etc. The one possession he still had with him ... was his Bible. These kids got to talk with him about their faith and what they'd been up to that week, while he enjoyed the first good lunch he'd had in a couple of days...

Do you see what happened here? Just as Jesus was focused on those who're normally 'overlooked,' so were these kids focused while coming home from that mission trip! They were tuned in to Jesus—to what Jesus would want! And, I for one believe Jesus was smiling down on them that day. They were intentionally reaching out to the 'overlooked.' So, what are we going to do about God's lead? What are we going to do about following Jesus in this way? I have some ideas...

WE NEED TO COME UP WITH A PLAN FOR OUR LIVES TO INTENTIONALLY REACH OUT TO THE OVERLOOKED...

First, for *families with young children*: Huddle up as a family—maybe over a meal—and ... discuss among yourselves who in your neighborhood may be *the loneliest*, for instance. Bake (or buy) a batch of Christmas cookies, having everyone help; make it a family project (*my daughter has an Advent calendar with things to do for others with her kids*). Secretly deliver the cookies in a gift-wrapped box to the porch of the person (or family) in question. Leave a note with the cookies that says something like, "God loves you ... and so do we!"

Second, for *adults and older kids*: In this season when we remember there was no room for the Christ child in the inn at Bethlehem, take time to serve those who often feel there's no place for them either. Volunteer to help at the Community Thanksgiving Dinner ... or at the Food Pantry—especially during this time of year. *But don't just make Christmas a project*, rather, let this be the beginning of a ministry to the 'overlooked'

throughout the year; volunteer to help at the Food Pantry or another outreach throughout the year; they can always use extra help...

Folks, as you can well see, following in the footsteps of Jesus—reaching out to the ‘overlooked’ in *our* community—is not that far of a reach. The ‘overlooked’ are nearer than we think. Let me share a story from my childhood Christmas memories, as I close:

We were living in Pardeeville, Wisconsin. My parents had three out of five children at this time. My father had moved to Pardeeville—all the way from North Carolina—to start a church from scratch, for the Wesleyan denomination. One of his faithful sheep, from the beginning, was a woman named Helen Thurston. Helen was faithful to come and do whatever she could to help support this young pastor and help get this much-needed church started. She had no children of her own ... and her husband wouldn’t have anything to do with church...

One day, my father asked Helen about that. And, he asked some of the other women in church, too ... where their husbands were on Sunday morning. The answer: Down at the bar. So, one Sunday morning, my father got them started at church—a hymn-sing I think—and then he told them he was going to visit their husbands. They were shocked, but he did. *If they weren’t going to come to him, he was going to go to them!*

Long story short, not everyone was as receptive as Orville Thurston to Dad’s rather in-your-face evangelism, but Orville and my father soon became close friends. He taught my father how to duck hunt—something he’d never had the chance to do as a boy in North Carolina. They went deer hunting together ... and fishing ... every chance they got. And, pretty soon, guess what? Orville was in church.

Because they didn’t have children, and no family to speak of, the Pegrams became their family. It didn’t take long to adopt Orville & Helen Thurston as an uncle and aunt. We’d go to their house for Thanksgiving ... and Helen, needless to say, was a marvelous cook! They’d always come to our house for Christmas, because ... as you know ... *Christmas is a holiday for kids!* My parents, thank God, were focused on the ‘overlooked’—those that didn’t have any kids at Christmas. Now the Thurstons had five kids they could call their own. And, our Christmases were more special than we could’ve ever imagined. I still remember little boxes of raisins from Santa Claus (aka Uncle Orville). And I remember, for years and years, being woken up on Christmas morning by the sound of Uncle Orville’s huge voice, screaming to the top of his lungs ... that he almost caught Santa Claus this year, but he got away just in the nick of time...

Who is there in your life ... who doesn’t have a family to share this family holiday with? Who is there in your life that’s not experiencing the joy of their own children, but might could enjoy yours ... and make your Christmas celebration even more special?

As we remember, today, the ‘canceled’ Christmas of 2000 in Bethlehem, let’s make

sure Christmas isn't cancelled in the hearts of those who need it most right here—those who may feel as overlooked as the shepherds did 2,000 years ago! Folks, just as God did then, he's still sending his messengers to proclaim, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people" (Luke 2:10, *KJV*). Do you know who God's messengers are now? [*Point to you ... and me!*]

Through your actions, spread the news, folks ... spread the news. And when you're sharing God's love with others this Christmas, make sure it's those whom Jesus would reach out to. Let's follow God's lead ... as we reach out to & honor ... the 'overlooked.'