

"TOUCH YOUR NEIGHBORS"
by Rom A. Pegram (12/3/17)

Did you hear about the guy who wrote a letter to the IRS? It was an honest letter, sent to the Internal Revenue Service, and it stated: "Dear Sirs: I cannot sleep. Last year, when I filed my income tax return, I deliberately misrepresented my income. Now I cannot sleep. Enclosed is a check for \$150 for taxes. If I still cannot sleep, I will send you the rest!"

Why am I talking about taxes, this morning? Well, the Bible has a great deal to say about taxes. Did you know that? For instance...

- "At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire ... ³ All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census." (Luke 2:1, 3, NLT)
- And, Jesus said, "Well, then," he said, "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God." (Matthew 22:21, NLT)

We normally don't think of taxes this early. But remember, the context of Jesus' birth more than two millennia ago had to do with *the taxation of the Roman Empire*. Caesar Augustus wasn't seeking a popularity vote; he wasn't announcing "No new taxes!" or "Tax cuts!" like we hear about from time to time. Quite the contrary; it was more like the opposite! *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 ... a role that Rome could use to collect taxes and feed its greedy appetite...*

The familiar words of our scripture lesson, this morning, don't go into excessive detail at all. They leave a lot of room to read between the lines ... and we might just do some of that today. But first, let's go to our Bible story. Hear, now, these familiar words from the Gospel of Luke (2:1-7, NLT)...

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. ² (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. ⁴ And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. ⁵ He took with him Mary, his fiancée, who was now obviously pregnant. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. ⁷ She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

Here's a tidbit of wisdom I want you to see in this scripture, before we go any further into the circumstances of this story today: *To get us where God wants us, God is willing to move the whole world, if necessary, to get us there!* Did you know that? God whispered in the Emperor's ear ... and the Emperor thought it was *all about taxes* ... but it was really *all about salvation*, wasn't it? Have you ever thought about that before?

Now, let's get into the details of today's story. The truth is, we don't know the

name of *the innkeeper* in Bethlehem, but because of his action on that particular night he will go down in history and be remembered forever. So, what was going on? Here's what I see: First—and this was obvious...

THERE WERE SEVERAL PEOPLE IN A JAM! The innkeeper for one—I'm sure that the innkeeper in this story had *a lot in common* with the other innkeepers in town!

If you'll indulge me... Motel row was in chaos that night! The manager of the local **Motel 6** had trouble '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 this particular hotel be *renamed*. There was no way a visit in Bethlehem at this time could be considered a 'holiday.' For the guests and the hotel staff, the chaos that resulted from Caesar's self-serving order was anything but a vacation! Somehow '*Holiday Inn*' didn't sound right...

Pardon the pun, folks, but this was a 'taxing' situation. Those with rooms for rent were all in the same boat; the innkeepers of Bethlehem were in a jam... And...

All those coming into town were *also* in a bit of a jam—in need of a place to lodge, having the same 'felt needs.' They needed: a warm bed, a roof overhead, and a slice of bread (Bethlehem = "House of Bread"). It wasn't the food they were worried about, however; they were considerably more concerned—and rightfully so—with a warm bed and roof overhead. This was a much tougher request on this cold night...

You know the story. As it turned out, Joseph and Mary were turned down. "*No vacancy*" signs flashed everywhere in neon red! Not a single bed was available that night. But, the good news was that Mary and Joseph were *not* turned out on their ear! Why? What was the innkeeper's response to this very delicate situation? *He* was in a jam ... and *they* were in a jam, but, in the midst of all this...

THIS INNKEEPER WAS WILLING TO SAY, "I'LL DO THE BEST I CAN!" Some *unnamed* innkeeper, sensitive to the obvious needs of this out-of-town couple, came to their rescue. He offered them an outdoor shelter for livestock, where they could be shielded from the wind and where, in the end, the baby could be cradled in a straw-lined feeding trough...

I Now, before you speculate about the innkeeper's generosity (or lack thereof), I'd encourage you to consider the context. Some people think, "Couldn't he do better than this? Mary was pregnant, after all!" Folks, give the guy a break! I believe he deserves the benefit of the doubt here...

If his motel was 'maxed out,' what other options did he have? I'm 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 by this point)...

No doubt the innkeeper had been tutored in the proverbs of Solomon and he was responding to the needs of these travelers because of his faith! For instance, Proverbs

19:17 says, “When you give to the poor, it is like lending to the Lord, and the Lord will pay you back” (TEV). He was living that scripture out! What we do for others is, in essence, a kindness done to God...

And, it sounds an awful lot like Jesus’ parable about *the sheep and the goats* from Matthew 25 (35-36, 40). You remember the passage ... and the essence of Jesus’ words ... “For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. ³⁶ I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me. ... And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!’” Can you hear Jesus’ words? Folks, the bottom line today is this, and with this I’ll conclude:

GOD IS SAYING TO US, “HEAR ME, IF YOU CAN!” Yes, there’re still people who are ‘in jams’ today ... and God is asking us, like the innkeeper, to do the best we can—with God’s help! Can you hear God’s voice to you today?

When Jane and I were first married, we did not have a thing—literally—except our love for each other. And, even though we knew we were fairly poor, we learned to live with it and do the best we could. (Igloo coolers for tables...) But, one area where we struggled in was in ‘reaching out’ and inviting others into our lives. Why? Because we obsessed about ‘what we didn’t have’ instead of concentrating on ‘what we did have’—all of the blessings that God had given to us...

At the encouragement of my parents, in particular, we began to get over these struggles and just turn ‘what we had’ over to God for him to use in whatever way he chose. We began to invite other couples out to our modest abode for evenings of food and fun. What we found was that ... *once we were willing to open our lives up and allow God to use ‘what we had,’ unbelievable things began to happen.* Relationships began to develop for both Jane and I that were wonderful—that we never expected. We found other couples with similar interests ... and life was better than we ever imagined it could be in the ‘friendship’ area...

Do you know what we did? We did just what the innkeeper did on that night with Mary and Joseph long, long ago. We didn’t obsess about what we *didn’t* have available; we concentrated instead on being willing to open up our home and offer what we did have! *There’s the lesson, as we begin this Advent season.* It’s about reaching out to others with ‘what we do have’ and letting God take care of the rest...

Folks, let’s not get preoccupied this Christmas season with the gifts *we get* ... or the gifts that *we give each other*. Instead, let’s get preoccupied with *the gifts we can give Jesus*. Remember what he said in Matthew 25. When we reach out to those who are in need, it’s as if we are giving a gift to him! Remember the innkeeper during this holiday season! His example shows us the kind of gifts Jesus enjoys. When we give of ourselves to people in need, we’re giving *real gifts* to the Christ-child...

So, do you think we have neighbors around us, this year, who are in need of a touch of Christmas—the innkeeper’s way? It’s true; most of our neighbors aren’t

homeless like Mary and Joseph were on that night—far from it. But, they have needs. How about those who are ...

- **Too busy** ... to get everything they need to done for this season? Could we offer a hand to help?
- **Exhausted** ... from all that life has thrown their way, because of health issues and so forth? Is there any way that we could reach out to them to help them renew their strength?
- **Confused** ... because of situations in their life over this past year that are unexplainable in human terms? They may just need an ear to listen. Is that a way that you could reach out to that neighbor?

Folks, nobody should know *your* neighborhood better than you do. But, how well *do* you know it? There's no time like the present ... to open up your home to those neighbors you haven't got to know yet ... to invite that person over for dinner who you've been meaning to have over for the past several months ... or years...

The bottom line ... is that people around us *need* us! *They need a touch in their lives that can serve as a pipeline for the healing grace of God—one that we alone can provide.* Today, as we begin this Advent season, ask yourself: ***Am I willing to be a pipeline for God's grace and love during this Christmas season?*** Am I willing to be used by God to touch my neighbors in a special way? Most importantly, just like the innkeeper, are you willing to reach out with *what you do have* ... and offer that to those who are in need? That's all God is asking you to do. Can you hear God's voice speaking to you today?