

SPOTLIGHT

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Homeless Outreach

By Richard Park

Some Wednesdays ago, I went out to the Homeless Outreach in Santa Ana. It was started some years ago by our parent church, Good Stewards Church, and every Wednesday morning - at six fifteen if you want to come - a group of them and a few of us from GNC take off to serve hot food and hand out some donated clothes and such. There is a steady stream of volunteers, bumping up and down the attendance every month or so. Lately we've been passing out choice Bible verses before the meal. Some of them take them, some don't. But we don't make a fuss of it and neither do they.

They are the homeless: beggars and bums, vagrants and tramps, hobos and all. They congregate a bit before sunup by the Santa Ana Civic Center.

They come in many colors, shapes, ages and backgrounds. Raul* is an elderly man who wears orange tinted shades and calls himself the president of the group. He knows me as Jonathan. Thanks Jonathan. Frank* grew up in Westminster and was active in student government back in high school. He almost singlehandedly got his senior prom cancelled from a misunderstood prank. Jeremy* is a tall black man and he writes and plays music. Even has a demo on hand. And Dave* is a big fat white man with big fat blond hair he keeps under a cap and tied in a tail. He's an avid student of history and watches the news religiously. He also goes to church religiously, all the time he says. And always there is a police car across the street watching.

By the time I get there at six forty-five, Angie and John are already there, mingling with the crowd, dare I say, ministering to the crowd. But this was a special occasion. Sam and Pastor Jay were also there. Sam had a guitar and soon roused a small crowd, as he sang a few praise songs. A younger man in a dirty

orange hoodie plopped down on his backpack to listen and a slightly demented old lady in a wheelchair touched Sam's cheek after he finished.

Pastor Jay then cleared his throat to speak. Imagine the absurdity; he speaks but will they listen? Couched in privilege as we are, and Asian to boot, yet how foreign is the message to their ears? But whatever need presses, whether for food and warmth or succor and security, this the greatest need that he preached: the need for salvation and redemption from sin. The need for Jesus as Lord and Savior.

The GSC van was late and they knew us enough now to help us unload the van and set it up. We prayed for the meal and then it was hot soup and a sandwich with maybe a banana and always much coffee. Sometimes we run out of coffee. Some of them bring their own mugs, (really just overused plastic cups from 7-eleven or such), and they drink a lot of

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Angel Tree

By Richard Ro

Rosalyn* is a little girl, 10 years old. She lives with her grandmother Marie*, her older brother Daniel*, and her older sister Estella*. Her father is an inmate in a rehabilitation center, due for release in three years. They live in a mobile home community about five minutes from our church, on Valley Blvd. It's likely that many of us drive past their community during the commute to church.

When I first called their home to confirm their information, Marie could not speak English well and handed the phone off to someone else. Thinking that another adult would answer, I was surprised to hear the voice of a little girl on the other end. But through the entire process, from confirming their information to delivering their gifts, this little girl Rosalyn became my primary point of contact. She told me where they lived, what her brother and

sister wanted for Christmas, and that they needed presents delivered on a Saturday because they were at church all day on Sundays. When I asked Rosalyn what she'd like to have for Christmas, she said she wanted a guitar. I let her know that a guitar costs a little too much and asked if she wanted anything else. So naturally, she said that she wanted a bicycle. This went on until we compromised on a doll. And on the way to deliver the gifts, when I couldn't find their home, I called and Marie immediately handed the phone to Rosalyn, who proceeded to tell me that I had to go straight, then make a left, then go up a hill, and make a left, and then another left... innocently directing me where to go without knowing where I was and without knowing any street names.

And when I finally arrived at their home, Rosalyn came running out of the door, in the rain and all. As I was taking the gifts up to their door, I said, "Rosalyn, these are from your dad," and she beamed. She said in response, "I'm gonna write my daddy!"

I'm gonna write my daddy.

Those words stayed with me. On a couple of levels.

On one level, it was awesome to see how happy Rosalyn was and to hear that she was going to write her dad. Of all the ministries at GNC, the Angel Tree program is one of my favorite (though Turkey Bowl is up there as well). GNC has been partnering with Angel Tree for almost as long as we've been around as a church and the families to whom we deliver gifts live locally, most living less than 15 minutes away. Out of curiosity, I decided to look into why the program is called Angel Tree. I mean, what exactly is an "angel tree?" It turns out that an Angel Tree is literally a tree of angels. Angel Tree was founded by a former inmate, Mary Kay Beard (who actually made it onto the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list). Mary accepted Christ during her time in prison and during her parole, she was asked to help develop a Christmas program for prisoners. She immediately

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coffee, some getting larger portions and seconds and thirds before others get even one cup. But how can you say something about that? One time, fearing the coffee would run out too soon, I turned away an old man in a wheelchair who wanted more. When the line ran up, we were still able to squeeze out a little bit more, so feeling guilty, I looked for the man, the cup of coffee in my hand getting colder and colder, but I couldn't find him. What if I turned him away forever? What if he despises me now? What if he despises Him in whose name I come? All for a cheap cup of coffee! Now I don't turn anybody away and hope there's enough.

When we're done, us and the GSC adults stand and hold hands in a circle with one or two of them at times, and then sing "God is so good" once in Korean and then in English and then two volunteers pray, one in Korean and then the other in English. With that we break and then maybe breakfast and then go on our merry.

But this week was a little different. There was a man named Miguel* who was there all the other times but not this time. This time he was in the hospital in critical care after being hit by a car. There was no

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thought of the women she had met during her time in prison. Many of these women would wrap toiletries (like soaps and shampoos) and give these to their children as Christmas presents. Though it would seem that children would scoff at toiletries as gifts, Mary was surprised to find that the children were joyful and excited to open Christmas presents from their parents, even if soap and shampoo. So Mary decided to put up a Christmas tree at a mall to attract volunteers to buy presents for these children, the tree decorated with ornaments of paper angels, with the children's names on the angels. It was a tree of angels ("Angel Tree") and this tradition continues today, across many organizations and churches including our own. With this opportunity to buy presents for children, restore family bonds, and share the love of Christ, it's great to see the overwhelming response from our own church members ever year.

On another level, as awesome as it was to hear Rosalyn's words, it was also very challenging. It brought to mind my relationship with God and how God has blessed me in providence and abundance. And yet those blessings are so infrequently met with joy or an acknowledgment of my thanks. Particularly during this holiday season, I find myself preoccupied with holiday sales (not even to get gifts for other people, I'm usually looking for sales to get things for myself), get-togethers with friends, what I'm

fault to speak of. It's a tragedy, an act of God and he's lying somewhere in between life and death instead of merely hunger and starving, or cold and shivering. John decided to go see him afterwards and I having nothing better to do, went with.

We arrived at the hospital and looked for the Critical Care Unit and found him in Room 1 or Room 3, I forget. He lay unconscious on a plastic bed, cradled in some sort of contraption that strapped down all his limbs and rotated him on an axle from side to side for God knows what reason. His face was bloated and so also his body and limbs, swollen up like a sickly balloon pumped full of fluids in the hope that he'd live. He was unrecognizable even if I could remember who he was and what he had looked like.

What could we do but pray and leave? And what could I pray but beg and plead. Oh there but for the grace of God...

And I go. It's likely that I'll forget. The stark feeling of helplessness and the cynical cruelty of it all. Does this man have family? Who is there to care if he lives or dies? Does anybody care? Do I care? Does God care? And what then? Oh the point itself! Is this man headed to heaven or hell? Was he saved or not? For the doctor said it's nearly certain now he'll

bringing to white elephant gift exchanges, and the Lakers-Heat game on Christmas day. During a time in which I should be ever thankful for really the greatest gift of all, I find that I'm constantly thinking about... well, about me. So like Rosalyn, I've decided to take some time to write my heavenly Father, not only for my blessings today but for blessings yet unrealized. "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ." Perhaps you can find a moment to write to your Father as well. †

**name changed for confidentiality*

die. How are you glorified in this, oh my God? My Savior, Jesus Christ, did you love him too? How then him and not me? How then homelessness for them and not for me? How then death torturous for him and life eternal for me? What did I do to deserve this? But I presume too much.

We're supposed to know the answers and the responses. So what then the lesson? What then the moral? The application? The admonition? The admission of sin and the repentance thereof? I don't know. So please, tell me. I want to know. I have to know.

But what I do know is that every time I've gone there, after I park and before leaving my car, I pray a desperate prayer, "Please God, please. Please, don't let me make a fool of you. Please, let them see your heart through my actions. Please, let them see that even though I don't care, that you do, that you love them." And ever always, I grit my teeth, get out of my car, walk up to them and speak with the tiniest glimmer of hope.

"For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

Phillipians 2:13 †

**name changed for confidentiality*