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## Introduction

### *The Least of These*

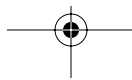


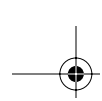
IT WAS A COLD WINTER EVENING, BUT IT WAS WARM INSIDE THE Nashville Rescue Mission where Michael Card and I were serving food, preaching, singing and doing dishes for several hundred weary souls who, after listening to us, were guaranteed a bed for the night. The audience really didn't tune in to the program. They seemed more satisfied to sit in a pew or bench seat just because it eased the burden of carrying their weight and gave them shelter from the frigid weather.



An elderly, heavy-set woman entered the small chapel amidst coughing and sneezing and muffled muttering. She looked haggard and worn out. It was difficult to tell if she was truly overweight or just loaded down under the three or four tattered overcoats she was wearing. I was in front of the group, who were talking loudly and being unruly.

She came forward slowly. I was singing a newly composed song about unborn children. Her bulky form shuffled in front of me, casting her shadow across my guitar in such a way as to demand imme-





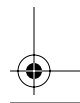
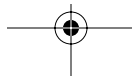
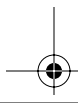
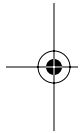
diate attention. She stood over my lyric sheet weeping, her tears hitting the song chart on the music stand and running down the manuscript, blurring the words.

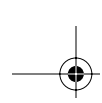
My first thought was that maybe if she just backed up I could finish this song and get on with caring for people. Then I looked her in the eyes. She was African American, old, poor, alone, weary and deeply sad. Embarrassed, I put my guitar down and moved the music stand to face her. As I asked her to tell me her troubles, it was as if the message of God meeting us in *the least of these* became incarnate, became real.

She said, "I need to tell you something." As she spit out her story, the sadness in her voice drew me in. "One of my daughters had an abortion, and I lost my only grandchild," she said, the pain still fresh in her heart. She continued her story, telling me that during the procedure her daughter's uterus was perforated. So not only would there be no baby, but the hope for future children and grandchildren was gone forever. The broken woman labored to finish, repeating phrases and forgetting where she was.

I thought of several spiritually clever answers to comfort her, maybe "Jesus loves you," or "All things work together for good." Any Scripture might have been appropriate. What could I say? Something in me told me not to speak, but instead to reach out. I put both of my awkward arms around her and pulled her close to me in a bear hug that made us look like two Eskimos slow dancing. I put my face right next to hers, cheek to cheek. I felt her warm tears still flowing and actually started to cry myself. I'd never been that close to a black woman. We held each other lamenting her loss and crying for a while as the people in the room, completely unaware of us, went on about their business.

Michael watched the whole thing. He spoke tenderly to me after-





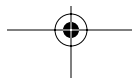
ward, saying, “You know she saw Christ in you?” It hadn’t occurred to me, but that seemed to be true. He went on, “Yes, she did, and that is a profound miracle to be Jesus’ representative with arms and tears and love. But the greater miracle, if that’s possible, is not that she saw Christ in you. It is that you met Christ in her.”

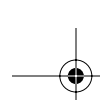
An elderly poor black woman and a young white aspiring activist artist combined to form a reality that was simple and complex. When Jesus said to love the least of these, he meant to love in both word and deed. Jesus relocated, and calls us to follow. His creative connectional reneighboring would demand action. Connectional reneighboring was Jesus’ method of coming to earth incarnate—his creation became his neighborhood.

*God’s Neighborhood* is a book about my journey in racial reconciliation and community renewal through a variety of societies living out a daily vision to love God and his people. I am a white pastor at a large Presbyterian church in Franklin, Tennessee.

Several years ago my wife, Linda, and I moved our family, which included an adopted African American son and a mixed-race son, into an African American neighborhood called Hard Bargain. We were responding to a call God placed in my heart to find new neighbors and “love them as I love myself.” I have partnered with some African American pastors and other brothers and sisters whose hearts have been warmed by the gospel to seek ways to serve our community as we serve one another.

For many years Michael Card and others have encouraged me to tell my story, and I turned to my longtime friend and brother, James Isaac Elliott, for help. I met James when he was a college student in Michigan, and we immediately connected. He followed me to Nashville where we wrote songs and played music together. Today he is a professor and an award-winning songwriter whose compositions



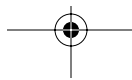


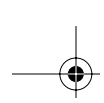
have been recorded by dozens of artists, including Steven Curtis Chapman. He was a founding member of Christ Community Church and has been a part of my life the past three decades.

I am telling this story from a small-town, southern American context, and to the reader it might not fit every experience in race-related situations. However, each one of us has a life lesson to learn about relating to people who are different. Wherever the salient point of conflict exists, God's people are called to love. For instance, there is profound racial tension among ethnic and religious factions within the Pacific Northwest, New England and Southern California. That strife is obviously not just between black and white people. Hatred among those groups seems unrelated to our struggles in Franklin, but confronting that conflict is the priority for people living in those regions.

It was Scotty Smith's vision to start a church in Franklin, and I was excited when he invited me to join him in the new adventure. From humble beginnings Christ Community Church has grown to several thousand members. We have many high-profile people living in our city, and on any given Sunday you might see singers like Michael Card, Steven Curtis Chapman, Steve Green, Geoff Moore, Alison Krauss, Buddy Green, Vince Gill, Amy Grant or members of the band Jars of Clay. Others who worship with us include bestselling author Peter Jenkins and racing great Daryl Waltrip. We are all seeking to find our place in the community of faith as we love and support one another.

The word *community* gets tossed around like it is something immediately understood. For instance, we love our community, we need our community, and we must protect our community. Yet the word is somewhat vague and undefined. As Christians we recognize the Bible teaches that we are to live our lives together as God's people. I discovered salvation is not simply an individual experience. It is rather additionally a corporate experience. God has said in Scripture, "I will





be their God and they will be my people.”

The work of Christian community required me to heed God’s call in Scripture to care for the poor. It became difficult to ignore Jesus’ mandate to love the poor. He clearly demonstrated this love by saving us from the destruction of our sin and restoring us to himself. I believe any Christian community worth talking about will come to understand and care about poverty, both in spirit and in material goods.

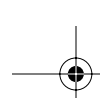
My personal journey into community renewal started as a young man witnessing the social turmoil of the early 1960s. I saw my need for truth and began to respond to it. Social justice, race relations, and care for the poor stirred my conscience. As I grew over the years, my ideas changed about every one of these issues. God led me through each transition. The journey was, is and always will be demanding of faith.

Christ’s cross is a reminder of God’s mercy. It is not always clear how the death of the Son of God remains the high point of our journey—his poverty substituted for ours, his life given for ours. But the hope for true community, though sometimes hard to grasp, is real and found in him alone. *God’s Neighborhood* is about understanding and participating in Christian community. It describes a response to the biblical mandate of care for the poor.

This response manifests itself specifically through racial reconciliation, creative connectional forms of reneighboring, and the empowerment of disinherited people. These categories are adaptations of John Perkins’s classic community development strategies of reconciliation, relocation and redistribution.

As I read John Perkins’s books *Let Justice Roll Down* and *With Justice for All*,<sup>1</sup> God opened my eyes to the needs beyond the difficult circumstances of *at risk* communities staring us in the face. We must look into the eyes of poverty and examine the heart, soul and psyche





of it. People aren't just in need of drug rehab, a roof over their heads or decent food to eat. They also require the dignity of true and relevant education, affordable health care, and living wage opportunities. John Perkins's holistic approach to community development was unlike anything I'd ever heard.

I first learned about Dr. Perkins through a video his ministry produced in Mississippi to promote Christian community development. Michael Card and I were traveling the country performing music concerts, and the tape had been given to us to view on the tour bus when we got bored. We watched it once, and it changed our lives. It immediately reinforced messages of caring for the poor that I heard as a child from leaders like John and Robert Kennedy. It also supported the concept of racial reconciliation, which was taking hold of me after listening to civil rights architects like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

I first heard the term *reneighboring* from the community developer Bob Lupton, referring to the work he was doing in an underserved community of Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>2</sup> This kind of creative language helped all of us to get the big picture of Christian community development.

My prayer is that you will be inspired, encouraged and challenged as you read this book. I hope that your heart will be moved to find your place in God's neighborhood as you discover how he has worked in my life. May God bless you on your journey.

