

**Editorial Submission for *The State*
The Rev. Furman Buchanan
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Helping Families who Fall through the Cracks

As a member of the clergy in our community, I hear a lot of sad stories about people who have “fallen through the cracks” and have nowhere else to turn for help. Some of these stories are more believable than others. I heard one recently that I found to be incredible. Perhaps you will agree.

The person in question was a young woman, probably thirteen or fourteen years old. She was not married, but she did have a boyfriend. And—you guessed it—she was also pregnant. They were not local residents, but somehow they managed to travel about 70 miles. I’m not quite sure how they did it, because they did not have a car.

Stories about teenage pregnancy often sound alike in many respects, and this case was no different. She was a suspect for a serious criminal offense, and doing her best to avoid the authorities who might bring her to justice.

Her plight was made all the more difficult because her boyfriend had to resolve some questions about his legal residency, which meant that he had to appear *in person* before the proper government office for that sort of thing. He was not an American citizen.

It was risky for her to be seen by the authorities because of her legal situation, but the boyfriend did not want to leave her behind because her pregnancy was at full term. As you might imagine, she did not have health insurance, or even reliable transportation to get the medical care she would soon need.

She claimed to be innocent of the crime of which she was suspected. Yet, there was reason to be suspicious of her mental stability because she also admitted to hearing voices.

As for the boyfriend, he seemed to be trying to do the right thing, but it can be so difficult sometimes to tell what the real story is in cases like this. There are always gaps that don’t make sense and pieces that don’t quite fit together.

The thing that was most compelling about their plea for help is that this young, pathetic couple was not asking for money or a hand out. They were simply looking for a safe, dry place to stay for a couple of nights. They were homeless, and they did not have any family or friends in town who could take them in. Her stomach was so large, it seemed like she might give birth any minute. This poor innocent baby was in grave danger. This child definitely fit the definition of “at risk.”

Their plea for help made me think of the homeless transition center that is proposed as an improvement upon the present downtown location at the Salvation Army where many of our city’s homeless people gather at night. The Knight Foundation, Churches, businesses, philanthropists and others have raised a significant amount of money to make just such a transition center into a reality for people like this girl and her boyfriend. It will be a place for those who have fallen through the cracks and just need a couple of safe, dry nights of sleep.

Unlike many of these stories, the case of this pregnant teenager and her boyfriend actually had a happy ending. Someone stepped forward and offered a transitional shelter for this needy couple. The place he offered was modest, but it sufficed. “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”¹

Of course, I am telling you a story you probably already know—It is the story of Mary and Joseph, and their “at risk” baby whom we know as Jesus.

Jesus, no doubt, heard from his parents about their homelessness in Bethlehem, where Joseph was required to register with the government census, and when his mother was at risk of being stoned to death for having conceived a child outside of wedlock. Jesus knew how important it is for people to step up and help families *like his* who fall through the cracks.

Near the end of his life, Jesus talked about righteous people, just like the person in Bethlehem who gave Jesus’ very own family a safe, dry place for a couple of nights—and like the people who even now want to build a transitional center for the homeless in Columbia, SC. And this is what Jesus said:

“Then the righteous will answer, “Lord when was it that we saw *you* hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw *you* a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw *you* sick or in prison and visited you? And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”²

Dear people of Columbia, who might we be serving if we will only step forward?

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¹ The Gospel according to Luke 2:7

² The Gospel according to Matthew 25:37-40