

## **Sermon: Jesus the Homeless**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, June 29, 2025)

Walking by the front of the Christ Church Cathedral of Ottawa, one is bound to pass by a homeless person sleeping on a park bench, seemingly wrapped in a thick layer of robe. It is not an unusual sight, unfortunately, in the downtown core, given the confluence of three overlapping crises, a perfect storm of housing shortage, fentanyl crisis, and escalating cost of food. However, upon a closer inspection of that particular park bench, one will find that homeless person to be actually a statue made of bronze.

It is a sculpture supposedly depicting Jesus as a homeless person. It represents, according to Bishop John Chapman of the Anglican Diocese of Ottawa, at the dedication ceremony on May 20, 2018, “the voice and presence of people who are homeless or street-engaged in our communities, and our belief that God is present wherever people suffer.” Its prominent location, added Chapman, is a reminder to “those who enjoy abundance to have compassion, and to work toward safe and affordable housing for everyone.”

The life-size sculpture was created by Timothy Schmalz, a Canadian artist, after he had seen a homeless man huddled under a blanket on a bench and thought, “that is Jesus”—a spiritual reflection no doubt drawn from the passage of Matthew 25:31-46, the parable of The Sheep and the Goats.

In the parable, when the Son of Man comes in full glory, and all nations and all people are to be judged and separated. the sheep (or so-called the righteous) to the right, the goats (or so-called the accursed) to the left. Both the righteous and the accursed were surprised by the claim of Jesus, to be (or not to be) fed, to be (or not to be) given water, or sheltered, or clothed, or visited by them. Both the righteous and the accursed were equally surprised by the ethical standard set by the Lord who says, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” Whatever we do for one of the least of these, we do for Jesus. Isn’t that surprising?

This installation by Schmalz adds Ottawa to a growing list of international cities which feature similar Homeless Jesus sculptures, also by the same artist, including Rome, Washington, Dublin, Glasgow, Singapore, Antwerp, Manchester, Madrid, Toronto and New York. The

reception to Schmalz's vision was not universal, however. Earlier when he first brought the idea to St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York and St. Michael's Cathedral in Toronto, it was overruled by diocesan officials, deemed the image as simply "not appropriate".

I could somewhat understand the hesitation of those religious officials. I mean, who would want to follow a religious leader who is homeless? Who would want to give their allegiance, their loyalty, and their means of production to someone who couldn't even keep a roof over his head? Would you? I know I wouldn't! At the very least, I would give it a long, very long second thought!

In our Scripture reading today, of Luke 9, someone enthusiastically exclaims to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." To which Jesus replies, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

Nowhere is more like: no-where-ever, to lay his head. Jesus wasn't simply describing his current personal circumstance of being homeless, he is warning the wannabe follower that following the Lord is a rough business. There is no comfort, no privacy, no security, no paycheck, no pension, and certainly no workers' compensation, nor disability benefits. Followers of Jesus maybe not even find a place to lay their head, and one can just forget about a good night sleep. Would you still want to follow such a homeless person?

It is no wonder others started making excuses when called by the Lord to follow: "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Or another, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." (With a distinct probability that members of my family will certainly talk me out of going on such a foolish adventure). Ok that last part was my own addition, but you get the gist. Jesus sees through their hearts, and sternly warns them, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

I don't know about you, but it is just my humble opinion: such a sentence of 'no one who [fill in the blank] is fit for the kingdom of God, is really not a good way to invite others along on a journey. If you prioritize the work of the kingdom, then you are in. If not, then you are out! It's a bit harsh, don't you think?

This is what Liv Larson Andrews, a Lutheran pastor and contributor to the Christian Century Magazine, in the June 2022 issue, has to say, "No

one who [fill in the blank] belongs in the kingdom. This sentence has been completed by so many preachers, teachers, and theologians over the centuries who have sought to define what is central to the practice of our faith. What does following Jesus look like? It's an essential question. But it has also been bent by hatred and levied in harmful, even violent ways, to the detriment of the kingdom. That pain and hurt is in the air when we read texts of judgment such as this."

I believe the key to understand this text, this attitude, this disposition of Jesus lies in a phrase that appears twice earlier, as he (that is Jesus) 'set his face to go to Jerusalem', that is towards the cross. This 'follow me or go home' moment moves Jesus closer to the cross. The cross, which will be the ultimate experience of rejection for the Lord, will become also the ultimate outpouring of mercy for all of creation: foxes, birds, fishers, farmers, full-time disciples, part-time followers, diocesan officials, parishioners, the homeless on the street of Ottawa.

The housing crisis has exacerbated the long standing problem of homelessness in Canada. I applaud all those who are trying finding creative solutions to create shelter space and affordable housing. I wish more could be done by Christian congregations and denominations, so folks who have nowhere to lay their head could one day all find a roof over their head and a warm blanket over their feet. Personally, I am involved in a Presbytery Taskforce looking into turning a particular vacant property in Barrhaven into affordable housing. It's a long drawn out process, but should it bear fruit, it could provide multiple unites of housing for those who are most disadvantaged.

However, I am also keenly aware that Jesus comes not to build affordable homes, but to build the household of God, the kingdom of God. In such a household, we shall all be blessed with the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Recently during the induction service of the incoming minister to St. Paul's Presbyterian Church on Woodroffe Avenue, I was reminded by the Interim Moderator giving the charge, on how unique and special the word 'fellowship' is.

In the context of a Christian worship, 'fellowship' or *Koinōnia* in Greek, is often used interchangeably with the word 'communion'. It expresses an active, willing and joyful participation in a common life. It expresses the ideas of sharing, partnership, communion and mutual contribution.

Although the term is Greek, it find its roots in the covenantal life of Israel, particularly in fellowship offering (in Leviticus 3), the communal joy of pilgrimage feasts (in Psalm 122, 133), and the incredible shared meal before the Lord God (in Exodus 24). These practices of Israel paved the way for a deeper communion revealed in the New Covenant.

From the writing of Luke, John and Paul, we come to see *Koinōnia* both in terms of its vertical axis (that is our relationship with God) and its horizontal axis (that is our relationships with one another). This term gathers spiritual, relational and material dimensions into a single practical reality for the Church: the life believers hold in common with God through Christ and with one another in the Spirit. At the heart of *Koinōnia* is this idea that all creation stem from the same creator, and thus shall find their collective fulfillment in reconciliation with the Triune God, and that is a lofty but worthy goal.

My call to ordained ministry is somewhat convoluted. At the heart of that call, contained a somewhat selfish component. Now looking back, I was quite foolish. In my mind, I made a bargain with God. You got to remember, I was a commodity floor trader back then, and my life had been....the best term to describe it is 'transactional', as Daisy would call me out on a number of occasions. So yes, I made a bargain with God: take care of my household and I will serve yours. It was a foolish one-sided ordeal, from my end (as I don't think God ever responded to my demand). But God has been faithful, for my household has no lack. So I continue to serve the Lord, but my understanding of why I serve has continue to be transformed.

Perhaps the homelessness Jesus experienced is a necessary step to awaken us of our own state of homelessness. Perhaps our homes, the households we built for ourselves pale in comparison to what Jesus has come to build, on earth as it is in heaven. Perhaps the Kingdom of God with *Koinōnia* at its heart is, should be our ultimate goal. To that end, the Lord Jesus is marching ahead. He is calling on you and I by name, to be welcomed into the mystery of the Triune God.

Will you come and follow? Will you leave yourself behind and never be the same?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**