

“Homeless”
Text: Luke 9:51-62

Sermon – June 26, 2022

Let us pray. Guide us, O God, by your Word, and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth, find freedom, and in your will, discover peace. Amen.

As the people arrived for church in a small town one Sunday morning, they were met by a rather disturbing sight. A homeless beggar sat on the front steps of the church building, wearing tattered clothing, a wool cap pulled down over his eyes, and clutching a bottle in fingerless gloves. They had never seen anything quite like this greeting them as they got into the church entrance.

Most worshipers simply walked around the man, or ignored him, as he sat there. Some muttered words of disapproval, and others suggested that the man move to another doorway before the Sunday school children arrived. One member told the man that the Salvation Army was a more appropriate place to sleep in. At one point, a kind woman brought the man a cup of hot coffee, but not one person asked the man to come in out of the cold, and certainly nobody invited him in to join them in worship.

Imagine, then, the people’s surprise during the opening hymn, when the homeless beggar made his way into the pulpit and took off his cap. The people recognized that it was their pastor! The pastor began his remarks that morning in this way: “I didn’t do this to embarrass you or to poke you in the eye. I did it to remind us that this is a human being that God loves, and God has called us to love him, too.”

Homelessness. It is a word that evokes different reactions from people. I’m sure you’ve felt something when you hear the word homelessness. We might feel guilty because we know that in our community we encounter people who are homeless. We might feel angry because we do not do better as a society to solve homelessness. We sometimes feel indifferent to the homeless, thinking they should pull themselves up. Or we might feel unaffected by the issue because we are paying our taxes and letting the government take care of the rest.

In reality, anyone can become homeless. Although the root cause is poverty, people become displaced or unhoused or homeless in all kinds of circumstances they did not choose. They were drafted into war, and not supported when they returned home. Or they experienced violence or were abused at home, so they distrusted the world from an early age. Or they were born gay or queer to families who view them as outcasts, so they were thrown out. Others were forced from their homes by natural calamities or war, and they were uprooted from their homes and never able to rebuild. They are jobless—not because they are lazy—but because they have no legal documents in order for employers to hire them. According to the Raising the Roof website, approximately 235,000 Canadians experience homelessness each year. The number of homeless people, and the length of time they spend homeless, continues to rise.

In today's Gospel reading, we see Jesus, James and John preparing to journey towards Jerusalem. Jesus was in search for hospitality in a Samaritan village, and didn't find it. No one offered Jesus a place to stay. James and John were so angry that they wanted to punish the Samaritans – to command fire to rain down on these people and consume them. But Jesus was not flattered at all- in fact, it made him very upset with his disciples' reaction. He had told them before, and he would tell them yet again, that if people didn't listen to them, if they would not welcome them, just shake the dust of that town from their feet and move on. And so they did. Jesus talked about the radical demands of discipleship. In this story, Luke introduces us to three would-be followers, who seem genuinely interested in following Jesus. There is a spirit of urgency that invades this story. Follow me, says Jesus - NOW! No ifs or buts. For the Lukan Jesus, it is definitely—now or never!

Let's look at these 3 followers starting from the bottom. The third would-be follower has an important business to wrap up before he can follow Jesus. He wanted to go home and say good-bye to his loved ones. What's wrong with that, you may ask? In light of the immediate mission ahead -- the sending out of disciples to the different villages -- for the followers to go home will mean that they will miss out, though their request seems reasonable enough. "If you're looking back," Jesus says, "you can't plow a straight row." That's another tough response. I guess when your face is set to Jerusalem like Jesus, it's hard to be impressed even with excellent excuses.

Jesus spots a second person. "Hey, there, let's go. Follow me." The person doesn't say no. He just had something else to do first, and it was an important one. "Let me go and bury my father first." In that ancient society, as it is in ours today, burying one's parents was a solemn obligation. It was a part of being obedient to the commandment to honour your father and mother. Who can blame this person? I'd do the same thing, wouldn't you? The second follower continued to reason: "I have responsibilities to bury my father. I'm not free to follow you right now. But when my father is all safe and secured six feet under the ground -- then I'll follow you right away." Jesus' answer seems harsh, one that is hard to understand. It seems to run counter to family responsibilities: "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go anyway and proclaim the Good News." What on earth does Jesus mean by these words? I like how Nancy Rockwell interprets this: "Leave him, let those with no vision of the future bury him who has no future." This is generally taken to imply that we should spend our time and energy on living people, not on dead people.

And the first follower steps up: "Jesus, I will follow you wherever you go." "Sure," Jesus answers. "Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but I have no home. I have nowhere to lay my head. I am a homeless man. Any bed I have is because someone lets me use theirs. You still interested? Life will not be comfortable when you follow me. There will be challenges along the way, difficult choices to make, you will stumble and fall, you will be homeless, hungry and lonely. It's your call.

The picture on the sermon slide is a bronze sculpture called "Homeless Jesus" created by Toronto sculptor and a devout Catholic, Timothy Schmalz in 2013. It depicts Jesus as a homeless person, sleeping on a park bench. His face and hands are hidden under a blanket but wounds on his feet reveal his identity as the crucified Christ. The statue has been described as a "visual translation" of the passage in which Jesus tells his disciples, "as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me". Schmalz intended for the bronze sculpture to be provocative, admitting, "That's essentially what the sculpture is there to do. It's meant to challenge people." When the statue was first displayed, there were a few complaints. Some people felt uncomfortable. Others thought it was offensive and sacrilegious. After being rejected from both St. Michael's Cathedral in Toronto and St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, his bronze

Jesus finally found a resting place at a Jesuit school in Toronto, willing to risk it. But art has a vivid way of speaking to the heart and imagination. By 2016, the “Homeless Jesus” found a home in more than 100 places worldwide. Jesus did not mix his words when he said he was a homeless man. He places himself with those who were displaced, uprooted, those who have nowhere to lay their tired bodies and wearied souls for comfort. A pastor claims that: “People become homeless for one reason alone: they have been disconnected from the social networks human beings require for survival...It’s not about what they did...it’s about what has been done to them.”

Homelessness certainly is an issue of concern not only here in Ottawa but in many parts of the world. The idea of being homeless never crosses our minds, until we see that person living in a cardboard box, or that family living in a trailer, or those people sleeping under an overpass or outside a building or in their own vehicles. Just like that homeless man who lives in his grey car on the corner of Moodie and West Hunt Club during the rise of COVID pandemic. Or those group of Ottawa residents, about 20 of them, who lost their homes due to a fire almost 2 years ago and became homeless campers or the woman who asked to use our parking lot as she lives in her truck while waiting for an opportune time to find a job. If you drive through the low-income areas of our community, the lack of affordable housing becomes apparent.

We cannot solve homelessness by ourselves. We need partners – faith communities, civic groups, corporations, governments, and individuals. But I also know too well that many of us here at BCUC support programs that respond to the issue of homelessness. Programs like the Multi-Faith Housing Initiative, The Veterans Housing Project or Raising the Roof. I’m sure there are many other ways where we can show that we care by supporting women's shelters, The Mission, Operation Go Home and Habitat for Humanity. The possibilities for help are endless. And I believe that one way to help eradicate or minimize the rise of homelessness is when every person is afforded a guaranteed livable income. The Rev. Richard Carter addressed his congregation during Homelessness Sunday and declared that "ending homelessness is something that needs relationships." He claims that one of the worst aspects of homelessness is loneliness. "Four walls and a roof is not a home", he said. "It can be a cell, the place of despair.

And surprisingly, many become homeless because they fear the loneliness and despair of being alone with themselves."

In reality, stories of homelessness don't have happy endings unless we step up to do something about them. But Jesus said it so himself – he was a homeless man. It's a story that bothers us, but it's here in the gospel of Luke, and it won't go away. How do we respond? There are so many homeless people in our communities that need our immediate attention. They might not be sitting on the front steps of our church building but they roam our communities, the streets of affluent neighbourhoods. They are also outside the doors of Canada in countries where life and humanity are taken for granted. As followers of Jesus, God calls us to respond with love and with justice. In doing so, we may find someone who doesn't look, smell, or speak like us. And that someone might be the Homeless Jesus in disguise.

Let me close with a poem written by the Rev. Richard Carter about what it means to be homeless and what it means to be human.

Hello, there is a human being in here,
Not an object, not a type, not an enemy
Not an irritation or a nuisance
Not a big issue
Not just a need to be fed second-hand sandwiches on a cold street
Or cups of tea in polystyrene
Not something to be processed, avoided, removed or discarded
Not something that has come to steal your territory
Not a colour, or a nation, or a category
Not a problem to be solved or an agenda to be discussed
Not a drug, or drink, or a knife, or a bet, or a nut or a take-away
But a human being in here
To be welcomed, recognised, respected, seen, heard,
Allowed space to grow, to flourish, to laugh, to speak, to give, to sing
To love
A human being like you
With you, with God
And God with us
A human being in here
A heart on the edge
The kin-dom of God is here now. Amen.