

**Sermon**  
**June 26, 2022**  
**Calvary Lutheran Church, Morro Bay**  
**Third Sunday After Pentecost**  
**Luke 9:51-62**

[I have the vague sense that I already told you the following story in a sermon. If so, raise your hand if you recognize it, and I'll modify it!]

Some years ago, I can't remember how many exactly, I attended the closing service of my old home congregation, Messiah Lutheran Church in Pasadena. It was where I grew up in faith, going there with my family every Sunday (and I mean EVERY Sunday we were in town) and lots of days in between. It's where my parents met, where my grandmother attended as a young person, where us seven children were baptized, confirmed, some married, all attended Sunday School and Vacation Bible School, all sang in some choir or another, to the best of our abilities. It was a happening place for our family for so long.

I can sit down right now and draw you a fairly accurate map of the place: the sanctuary, and classrooms, the fellowship hall, the fireside room, the offices (well, the pastor's office not so much because I rarely went there), the nooks and crannies, the backstage (yes), the sacristy. I'll stop there. You get the idea. It was my second home, where I learned about Jesus and community, play and study, engagement with the world of faithful people. I can't say enough about how the pastors and people of that congregation formed me.

And then, over time, the congregation dwindled. People died and moved away and they weren't replaced. In the end, one persistent and present family made up the bulk of the attendees. Hard to believe, but with the last part-time pastor, they made the decision to close, and make room for a to-be-determined Spanish-speaking new congregation to start. Well, the new start didn't take, and a year or so later, the place went entirely empty. And at the recent

synod assembly, I heard that two church properties were up for sale. So I looked it up, and there it was, the property at 570 E. Orange Grove on the listings. With pictures of empty rooms, evocative, sad, empty spaces, that were profoundly affecting to me. It was a homeless church moment.

In today's gospel passage, Jesus says to a person who wanted to follow him these surprising words, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." In other words, he is homeless. Why? Apparently because he has set his face to go to Jerusalem, where he is sure that he will be arrested, brought to trial, and condemned to death. He is uprooting himself not only from Nazareth, but also from the usual expectation that he will grow old among his people. Rather, having made his home among humankind, he was going to meet an early death. Not by accident, but at the hands of a mob that was going to be stirred up for that purpose. It was a sober turning point for Jesus, I can only imagine.

Up to this point in Jesus' ministry according to Luke, there were plenty of healings and evocative parables and calling of disciples and the feeding of the 5000 and the transfiguration. Maybe it was that last event that put Jesus in a serious mood, because he talked about it with his disciples when he came down the hill. That he would be betrayed into human hands.

So the stories that follow today's passage take on a much more severe tone. He speaks woes to unrepentant cities. He is accused of being Satan, casts out demons, despairs of being understood, warns against hypocrisy, tells stories about the rich fool and the barren fig tree and the narrow door. He laments over Jerusalem, talks about repenting or perishing, declares that he is a cause for division. And he says "Let the dead bury the dead" and "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Do you get the idea? It turns out that

the next place that Jesus will rest his head, really rest his head, will be in the grave offered by Joseph of Arimathea.

I read a provocative essay by a defender of Jesus who said that Jesus could never have been homeless, because he could always stay in the homes of his disciples. He had friends enough for decades of sleepovers. For one thing, I don't understand how couch surfing is not a form of homelessness. But the argument was, if he were homeless, how could he possibly have founded the movement, the religion that he did? How could he have established Christianity? I find myself in deep water here.

I was also disturbed by this person's words. Because, it seems, Jesus was not intent on founding a religion. His was more an anti-religious movement. It was less about establishing an institution than about establishing a holy relationship with the divine, a movement toward direct engagement with a loving, forgiving, compassionate God. Jesus was making a new eternal home where sacrifice was not the rule, but rather mercy. And to do this, Jesus didn't need to have a home, I think.

Musician Ray Makeever made the point in his song, which I know that at some time or another, you have sung here. We talked about it in yesterday's planning session. "The church is not a building, where people go to pray. It's not made out of sticks and stones, it's not made out of clay. We are the church, the body of our Lord. We are all God's children and we have been restored."

The church is not a building. It was not created like a club or a business, but as a living body of faith, of following Jesus, of being empowered by the Holy Spirit, of becoming more grounded in the love of God. This idea of fellowship and discipleship is what compelled Jesus and it is what compels us.

A Canadian sculptor named Tim Schmalz has been making copies of what he has called The Homeless Jesus. The sculpture depicts a park bench, the kind made out of concrete bases and wooden planks. An indistinct figure is curled up on the bench, covered almost entirely with a blanket, except that you can see a face through the folds and the feet are uncovered, and in the feet there are large open wounds. In places where the statue has been installed, in full size, there have been many reactions. Some find them awe-inspiring, calling to mind the parable of Matthew 25, “when you [help] one of the least of these, you do it unto me.” Others mistake it for a real person and try to offer help. Or some call the police on a supposed vagrant. Or when they see it for what it really is, they are creeped out, or scandalized – “it demeans the neighborhood”, one person is quoted as saying – or the bemoan that money was spent on the statue instead of direct services to the poor.

Others say that it shows exactly who Jesus was, emptying himself out for the sake of others, illustrating in his person the Beatitudes, blessed are the poor, the mourning, the hungry, the meek. When Pope Francis saw the statue for the first time, he stopped, laid his hand on the body, and said a prayer. Jesus’ homelessness is our homelessness just as his home is our home. I know, it can be confusing. And controversial.

Earlier in Luke’s gospel is recorded Jesus’ presentation at the temple by his parents, as an infant. And at that even, old Simeon says, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.” People will become divided in opinion about Jesus. We’ll read more about THAT in a few weeks. But for us who believe, what is revealed by Jesus most of all is where our homes are. Our homes are, as it turns out, where Jesus is.

Augustine was a church leader, a convert to following Jesus, who became the bishop of a region called Hippo in what is now Algeria, during the late fourth and early fifth centuries. He wrote a sort of memoir and spiritual autobiography called *Confessions*, one of the first of its kind. He wrote, “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee, O God.” In other words, we are at home when we know that God knows us. Until then, we might as well be homeless.

The same is true for our churches, our church buildings. Do they serve other people as well as ourselves? I can say in the case of Calvary that this is true. I have to tell a short story about the congregation Mary began serving in 1996. It was a diminishing congregation, Norwegian in character and history. It took her maybe a few weeks to learn that once worship started at Trinity Lutheran, one of the well-meaning ushers locked the front doors. Probably with the intention of preventing intrusion or theft. But can you tell what message this gave to potential visitors, or even late-arriving members? Mary gave the ushers a word to the wise.

Also under Mary’s leadership, when the teachers of the city’s school district went on strike, they opened their fellowship hall to a strike school. And after that was over, God led a predominantly African American preschool to Trinity, where it stayed until COVID did it in. And a Baptist congregation from hill natives of Southeastern Asia came to worship on Sundays. And we developed a front-steps project to feed some high schoolers from next door who were hanging around on our property during lunch break. [Have I told you about all of this already?]

The Lutheran church in this country has been diminishing in numbers for, well, since the early 60s. What does that make? Sixty years? There are many social and religious reasons for this diminishment. But to sum it up, maybe without giving reasons, it might be due to the fact of

much of our population no longer seeking, or seeing, the Lutheran church as a possible spiritual home.

On the other hand, people still have within themselves, as Augustine suggested, that God-shaped hole. Rowan Williams, the former presiding bishop of the worldwide Anglican communion wrote: It's not an itch you can scratch. It's not saying, 'This is what I want, and this is what satisfies it.' It's more that there is in us a deep incompleteness that is brought to fruition only with the infinite, the inexhaustible." This is being at home in God's world.

One of the hymns we sang at the closing of the congregation at Messiah Lutheran Church in Pasadena was "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation." I remember singing that hymn quite frequently growing up. Especially the middle part of each verse when the melody goes up. [hum the part.]. And here's the part that sprung on me like the Holy Spirit: "Have you not seen all that is needful has been sent by God's gracious ordaining." Those words made me feel at home in my homelessness. Confident that not all who wander are lost. Assured that the One who made their home among us will walk through whatever unsettledness we may ever experience. Amen.

Rev. Brian Stein-Webber      June 25, 2022