

Homeless

Second of four sermons in the series “*At Home at Church*”

by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher

Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

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- 1 John 4:13-15 Good News Translation ¹³ We are sure that we live in union with God and that he lives in union with us, because he has given us his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and tell others that the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ If we declare that Jesus is the Son of God, we live in union with God and God lives in union with us.
- John 15:4-5 Good News Translation ⁴ Remain united to me, and I will remain united to you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it can do so only if it remains in the vine. In the same way you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me. ⁵ “I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Bonded to God through faith in Jesus, we are never abandoned or “spiritually homeless.”

A week ago yesterday, about ten minutes before I was to start the memorial service for Ruth Regula, a woman timidly approached the open door to my office. Blue jeans, a zip-up sweatshirt, shoulder-length brown hair pulled back simply from her face – no make-up. She moved like she was in unfamiliar territory. I had never seen her before.

“How can I help you?” I asked, pretty sure what she was there to ask for. I motioned for her to step into the office.

“I’m sorry,” the woman began. [I’ll call her Ann.] “When I came here I didn’t know there was something else going on,” gesturing toward the lobby full of people talking, hugging, starting to make their way into the sanctuary for the memorial service.

“That’s all right. It’s a funeral that’s about to start. So how can I help you?”

Ann explained that she and her family are homeless. They have an appointment for an interview to apply for CMHA housing, she said, but that interview isn’t for two weeks. Until then they are living in her car. Ann asked for money for food or gas. Everything they own is packed into the car, she explained, so they don’t have room for groceries. I figured she said that in case I was thinking of giving her some boxes or cans of food from the recent Food Sunday collection.

When Ann had walked up to my office I was about to go into the sanctuary to check on things one last time before the start of the memorial service. In the background I could hear Glen playing the medley of beloved old hymns the family had requested. In my head the clock was ticking.

I said to Ann, “Ordinarily we don’t give out cash to people.” We used to. But we stopped doing that quite a few years ago. As a result, we also saw fewer people coming in asking for help – apparently word on the street gets around.

Nowadays when people come to the church seeking financial assistance, we refer them to a non-profit called the Lakewood Community Services Center. Our church gives “LCSC” money each year because they are much better equipped to talk with people and determine exactly what’s needed, as well as sniff out people trying to scam the system. But helping people understand that referral process takes time... and I had a funeral starting in about five minutes. So I gave her – *we* gave her, through the In His Name Fund – we gave her \$20 and some words of hope and blessing. That didn’t heal her situation, and it didn’t make me feel particularly good either. But it was gratefully received and would help her get beyond this moment of crisis until the next one arises.

When we think about “the homeless,” how often do we think about people like Ann and her family? We may picture grizzled guys living under a highway bridge, or lean, street-wise young men living in a downtown shelter. Remember the old Interfaith Hospitality Network – now called Family Promise, which provides temporary housing for homeless families? If you were one of our volunteers with them, you’ve seen how many homeless women and children there are. Last year alone, the Cleveland Municipal School District had 2,774 students registered as “homeless” for some part of the school year.¹ I’ve been told that for someone struggling just to live in poverty it takes very little to cause them to slip into homelessness--maybe an illness that causes you to lose your job, or your car breaks down and you can’t afford to get it fixed, and with that you’ve lost your ability to get to work.

Of course, homelessness is not always about poverty; nature, politics, family dynamics, other circumstances can cause people to become homeless.

- Hurricane Florence undoubtedly will have left many people homeless once that area begins to dry out.
- On an international scale, over the last few years the country of Jordan absorbed nearly 700,000 homeless people, refugees from the war in Syria to its north.
- Simply a matter of timing can cause homelessness: one summer during our college years, technically my older brother and I were homeless for a week in St. Louis. Our summer lease of a professor’s house ended a week before we could return to our respective colleges and move back into our dorms. But we had the cash to be able to stay in a dumpy little hotel in downtown St. Louis for that week, so at least we had a place to sleep.

Jesus said, “Poor persons will never disappear from the earth”² (or “The poor you will always have with you”). Was he saying, “Don’t worry about them; you’ll never take care of *everybody*”? Probably just the opposite. You see, when Jesus said, “The poor you will always have with you,” he was quoting the opening words of some verses of Hebrew scripture that would have been so familiar to his hearers that all he needed to say was the first phrase, and their minds filled in the rest. It’s like if I said, “Sticks and stones....” In your mind you hear “...will break my bones, but words will never harm me.”

So when Jesus said, “The poor you will always have with you,” his audience knew the rest of the verse: “Therefore I [the Lord God] command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’”³

Homelessness is not merely a wintertime condition. In this church we have members who are heavily involved in serving homeless persons through the Socks Plus Initiative, or shelters run by the Salvation Army, or Lutheran Metropolitan Ministries, or The City Mission, or Family Promise, or Providence House, Cleveland’s crisis nursery that keeps families together as they help the parents work through difficult circumstances. Those programs and many more provide us with opportunities to take our feelings of concern for the poor and homeless and turn those feeling into caring action. You can start small – maybe doing just one small thing – and expand your involvement as God guides you to.

At this church we’re treating the month of September as a sort of month of homecoming – coming home to the relationships, the activities, the commitments, the connections that make our church a “home” for us. This month’s sermon series I’m calling “At Home at Church.” The series enables us to explore some different dimensions of “home.”

So we can picture the social reality of homelessness:

- We see the homeless, jobless person moving about city streets, spending time in public spaces and catching sleep in a library or lobby, a bus stop or a building doorway.

¹ This figure was shared by Natalie Leek-Nelson, President and CEO of Providence House, Cleveland’s crisis nursery, at the Annual Meeting of the Community West Foundation 9/12/2018.

² See John 12:8 in various translations

³ Deuteronomy 15:11 Common English Bible

- We can imagine the inconvenience and inevitable stress of being homeless and having to move with your children into the basement or spare bedroom of a friend or relative while trying to maintain a routine and a sense of normalcy for your kids.
- We might even be able to begin to fathom the loss of dignity, the sense of confinement, the struggle of keeping things together at work, and the ever-present stress of not violating any laws if you're homeless and living out of your car or pick-up or minivan.

But aren't there some other ways that people might have the experience of feeling homeless, even if they *do* have a place to call home? This week I read about the difficult time some college students have when they first move away to school. It used to be that you'd meet your new dorm mates by wandering up and down the halls, talking to those you'd meet as you passed by propped-open dorm room doors. But apparently students today are so accustomed to connecting with their best friends by texting that some haven't developed their ability to make acquaintances simply by greeting and chatting with strangers. So there they are, living in a dorm full of hundreds of men and women their age, yet feeling quite isolated and far, far from home in a place that is their new home.

Or, maybe you know someone – or you are someone – who feels they can never go home again. The place you grew up, the family you were raised in is still there... but in anger some words were said, or some harm was done, a trust betrayed. Anger, bitterness, profound emotional pain, sadness act like a moat, like some invisible "Star Wars" force field keeping you away from the place and the people who nurtured you and watched you grow. What once was "home" for you has either been taken away, or it no longer feels welcoming and accepting. The disconnection can feel like homelessness.

Now, here's the good news. Here's the gospel. In an old translation of the Bible Jesus is quoted as saying, "I will not leave you comfortless. I will come to you."⁴ Even when we feel isolated, cut off, without a home, we are not alone because God has assured us of God's loving presence in Jesus. In the first epistle of John we're told that knowing Jesus as the Son of God assures that we live in union with God.⁵ We're united with God. We are united with God if we happen to feel comfortable at home. We're united with God if we've been pushed out of the nest and driven away from the familiar comforts of home because people have disappointed us or injured our spirits or even our bodies. In sending Jesus to be our savior God has promised us – promised us! – that we will not be cast off, isolated, abandoned, left comfortless.

Jesus assures us that we are always at home in him; we are at home in his secure, protecting nurturing love when we put our trust in him.

The classic film "The Wizard of Oz" is a story about a girl who feels as though she's homeless. Powerful forces of nature seem to have wrenched her away from the familiarity and comfort and security and nurture of her homestead in Kansas. Following the instructions of Glinda the Good Witch, putting her trust in that spirit's power, Dorothy closes her eyes, clicks her heels and repeats, "There's no place like home."

Jesus assures us that we are always at home when we entrust our lives to him. He speaks to people living in homelessness. He speaks to people who feel homeless, disconnected, cut off from home because of harm that was done to mind, body or spirit. He speaks to all who feel compassion for the homeless and long to help and heal. To all Jesus speaks words of assurance, words of comfort, words of hope. Jesus assures us that we are never alone or abandoned, promising, "I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."⁶ Jesus reaches out to us, invites our trust, and says, "When you live in me there's no place that won't be home."

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⁴ John 14:18 King James Version

⁵ cf. 1 John 4:15 Good News Translation

⁶ John 14:3b New Revised Standard Version