

Why, out of all the people in history, do we keep coming back to this one man—this Jewish carpenter-turned-rabbi from Nazareth who lived over 2,000 years ago? Why do billions of people across the world—and across centuries—still trust him, sing about him, follow him, and give their lives to him? Why Jesus? This is what Greenville native and Methodist Bishop and preacher, Will Willimon, asked in a book he wrote entitled, “Why Jesus?” This summer’s sermon series is based on that book. Why Jesus? Because “sometimes people say, ‘God? Oh, can’t say anything definitive about God. God is large, nebulous, and vague. We wish. By rendering God into an abstract idea, we think we can be assured that we’ll always be safe [from accountability to] God. By raising the crucified Jesus from the dead, it was as if God said, ‘You want to know what God looks like? You want to know what the Creator really wants from the creature and creation? Look at Jesus’” (Will Willimon, *Why Jesus?*)!! Why Jesus? Because Jesus is God with skin on. We turn to Jesus to try to see God, be with God, and to learn how to act like God wants us to act. Jesus is not someone we simply study like a figure in a textbook. He’s someone we meet. Someone who meets us. In other words, Jesus is relational. And isn’t it something that most of the time in Scripture Jesus meets people on the road or journey?! This summer we will be exploring the many different aspects of Jesus, God with skin on in the person of Jesus. Today’s aspect to explore is Jesus as Vagabond. I had to look up what vagabond means, as the few times I’ve heard it referenced, it was in a negative way. No, the word vagabond is not in my daily vocabulary. How about for you? A vagabond, in its purest form, is someone who has no settled home; a person who wanders from place to place. The term "vagabond" in the context of Jesus's life refers to his itinerant ministry, where he traveled and preached without a permanent home. That’s right- the

God we worship is a transient, loving God. Jesus sets his very self into motion in the world as Love embodied. This incarnate Love has no settled home. This Love is not stationery or stagnant. This Love is not removed from desolate places but rather relocates to find its way there. God's love can be anywhere and in anyone. If Jesus calls us to follow him, which he does- then as a vagabond, he's probably calling you and me to be vagabonds, too. So, as the band just sang, "Come all you vagabonds, you don't belongs, winners and losers, come, people like me. Come all you travellers tired from the journey, come wait a while, stay a while, welcomed you'll be. Come to the feast, there is room at the table. Come let us meet in this place. With the King of all kindness who welcomes us in, with the wonder of love, and the power of grace. The wonder of the love, and the power of grace" (Stuart Townend's, [Vagabonds](#)). Before turning to Scripture and for God's Word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

In light of the recent discussion about the City of Greenville possibly putting an anti-camping ordinance into place, I've been reflecting a lot upon Timothy Schmalz's "Homeless Jesus" statue, which depicts Jesus as a person experiencing homelessness, sleeping on a park bench. Although most of the benches downtown conveniently have a bar across the middle of them, I wonder what would happen if someone commissioned to have this statue placed downtown near Falls Park? While the sculpture was designed, like much art, to evoke compassion and raise awareness, it also raises the plight of those experiencing homelessness by visually representing Matthew 25:40, where Jesus identifies with the marginalized. When I first laid eyes on Schmalz's work in Davidson, NC in the mid 2000s, it made me think of today's text in Matthew's Gospel, which is also found in Luke 9. Like other passersby, at first, I mistakenly took the statue for a

real person. In Davidson, the statue of Homeless Jesus is located on the grounds of “St. Alban’s Episcopal Church, in the middle of an upscale neighborhood filled with well-kept townhomes. Jesus is huddled under a blanket with his face and hands obscured; only the crucifixion wounds on his uncovered feet give him away. When the statue was revealed, the reaction was immediate. Some loved it; some didn’t. One woman from the neighborhood actually called police the first time she drove by, as she thought it was an actual homeless person. That’s right. Somebody called the cops on Jesus, y’all! Some neighbors feel that it’s an insulting depiction of the son of God, and that what appears to be a hobo curled up on a bench demeans the neighborhood. In a 2014 NPR interview, the priest at St. Alban’s said, ‘We believe that that’s the kind of life Jesus had,’ Buck says. ‘He was, in essence, a homeless person.’ Davidson was the first town or city in the US to display the statue" ([link](#)). There are other cities in the US and around the world that followed suit, including outside the Vatican in Rome. Today’s text, as well as this statue, reminds us that homelessness is very complex, as is following Jesus.

Today we follow Jesus—not the lily white, blue-eyed, Sunday-school flannel board version with his creepy, calm smile and flowing robes—but the *real* Jesus. The Christ who walks dusty roads with blistered feet. The Christ who has no home, no wealth, no worldly security. This morning’s Gospel story begins on the heels of a healing story with Jesus ordering the crowds to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Then we’re quickly moved to this story of two people who offer themselves to follow Jesus. The first person was a scribe: a professional student of Scripture. He says to Jesus, “Teacher, I’m willing to go wherever you go.” One clue that this is an example of what not to say or do is that this scribe calls Jesus “Teacher” and not “Lord.” In Matthew’s Gospel, opponents used “Teacher” to

address Jesus, not his disciples. Then this scribe makes a promise that he is not able nor willing to keep. His eyes are much bigger than his stomach. “Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head.” Why does Jesus say this? Maybe because He wants the scribe, who is not yet a disciple, to understand: Discipleship is not comfortable. It is not a self-improvement project or a spiritual upgrade. Discipleship is not a class that you can audit for no grade. To follow Jesus is to walk away from the safety of “home”—not necessarily physically, but spiritually, emotionally, and socially. The Christ who looks into the eyes of would-be disciples and says: “Are you sure? I have nowhere to lay My head.” This is Jesus, the Vagabond—and he is calling us to follow Him, no matter the cost.

Jesus doesn't just *experience* homelessness—he challenges others with it. It's not because he couldn't arrange a place to stay. It's because this was part of His mission. Imagine a king who gives up his throne to live under a bridge with the those who may feel like exiles from society. Jesus does not visit them once a week to hand out food; he becomes one of them. Why? Because Jesus cannot save us by staying in the palace. That's what Christ does. He steps out of the glories of heaven to walk the streets of a broken world. Perhaps Jesus' homelessness is not just circumstantial but also theological?! Jesus is the fulfillment of the Isaiah 53 prophecy: “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” He was homeless not just on earth, but even in human hearts. “He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11). The world had no room for Him. Not in the inn. Not in the synagogue. Not even in many hearts today. “Jesus's itinerancy illustrates a quality of discipleship, a preference for mobility, not stasis and institution, for an unsettled, dispossessed

existence often in tension with the dominant society” (Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*). Back to the gospel story.

Next a disciple approached Jesus and said, “*Lord, let me first go and bury my father*” (v. 21). But Jesus said to him, “*Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead*” (v. 22). This sounds severe—almost heartless. How can the dead bury other dead? But Jesus isn’t being dismissive of grief nor is he talking literally. He is being radically clear: Discipleship demands primary allegiance. Its repetition in Matthew’s Gospel highlights a commitment that must be constantly renewed. Discipleship has highest priority...” (Carter). Even good things—like family loyalty—must not come before Him. This echoes the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before Me.” “Sometimes piety expresses that commitment and sometimes, as here, it gets in the way” (Carter). We know that the human heart is a factory of idols. Anything—even noble things—can become a rival throne. “Perhaps Jesus speaks metaphorically, or perhaps, he speaks illustratively, like in Chapter 19 (v. 21), when Jesus instructs the rich man, but not every follower, to sell his possessions. Either way, Jesus’ words are a reminder that no matter how important or urgent it may seem, there is nothing that takes priority over the call of Jesus. Discipleship is hard, countercultural, single-minded, marginalized, and a difficult and liminal lifestyle of absolute and continuing commitment to Jesus amidst participation in society” (Carter). Who said following Jesus and living kingdom life on earth as it is in heaven was going to be easy?

No, we don’t get to follow Jesus on our own terms. That’s the mistake the scribe makes: “I will follow you wherever you go!” But Jesus pushes back: “*Do you understand where I go?*” Because where Jesus goes is often not where our

comfort wants to go. Now here is the paradox: Though He is a vagabond, Jesus is also King. His homelessness is not weakness—it is sovereign humility. He chooses the path of poverty, not because He lacks power, but because He is wielding it in a redemptive way. Nothing in Jesus' life was random or out of control. His lack of a home. His rejection. His death. His resurrection. What the world calls failure—the Cross, the poverty, the homelessness—is actually part of God's sovereign plan for redemption. "Though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). "The Galilean who made fools of Death and of the Devil was a vagabond in many dimensions. The gospels differ on aspects of Jesus, but they agree that Jesus lived his adult life as a wandering beggar, without visible means of support. He never held a job or had a proper home. Many Jews expected God to come and save them; few expected God to show up as a man experiencing homelessness, unmarried, and unemployed. Constantly, Jesus crossed lines and transgressed boundaries" (Willimon). So yes, Jesus had nowhere to lay His head. But in that very emptiness, Jesus makes room for us. In being cast out, He brings us in. What does this mean for us?

1. Following Jesus will cost you something.

If following Jesus has never made you uncomfortable, you may be following a version of Jesus that lives in your pocket, not the Jesus of Matthew 8.

2. We are pilgrims, not settlers.

If we follow Jesus, we are called to live differently from this world- "in" but not "of" it. Therefore, we speak often of being "aliens and exiles" in this

world (1 Peter 2:11). Don't expect the Christian life to feel at home in a world hostile to God.

3. **Our true home is Christ Himself.**

We don't follow Jesus because He gives us comfort—we follow Him because He is our comfort. He may lead us through homelessness, hardship, and even death—but He is our refuge in and through it all.

Think of how Israel followed God in the wilderness. They lived in tents, not because they were lost, but because God Godself was moving. He was their guide. Their home wasn't a place—it was the presence of the Lord. So too with us. "You can see why all the gospels depict Jesus as on a journey and those who believe in Jesus as fellow travelers. Any portrayal more static, fixed, and stable would be unfair to the subject. Jesus will not be restrained, constrained, or contained. Jesus is a journey for the Bible introduces us to a living, speaking, moving Person, not to the diced and final word on everything" (Willimon). So friends, you renegades, rebels, and runaways, you back-sliders, you prodigals who got lost along the way...these are the ones that Jesus loves. Jesus, as a vagabond, calls to each of us today: "Come, follow Me" as vagabonds, experiencing and sharing Christ's love in this static, lonely and broken world. Amen.