

Without Shelter
Matthew 8:18-20
February 19, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
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*“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests,
but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”*

I took a seminary course once that included a trip to New York City. My class stayed in a dorm at an Episcopal seminary in Chelsea. We visited St John’s Church at Ground Zero, and the Bowery, and several meal programs run by churches. One evening we attended a worship service at a little storefront church in Hell’s Kitchen that serves mostly homeless, mostly LGBTQ folks. It was there that I first learned that this scripture passage, about the foxes and the birds and the Son of Man, is particularly precious to folks who live without shelter. “Look,” they said, “Jesus was homeless. Like me!”

I had never thought of Jesus as homeless. I realized then that I had a privileged understanding of Jesus – as maybe someone like me, who had plenty of resources, and was simply enjoying the hospitality of friends and family in different places. But – come to think of it – he didn’t have a home of his own. And we read of Jesus and the disciples making journeys that would surely take several days. It is likely that they slept rough at least sometimes. And this passage says plainly that “the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Jesus was homeless. Without earthly shelter. Like so many of our neighbors. Like some of the people who use our little pantry. Like millions of people in Turkey and Syria who had homes last week and now have none.

Our homes anchor us. They root us in time and space. Homes embody our history – the comfortable chair that has sat in just that place for years. Our homes remind us of our families – the pictures on the wall, the cake pan or hammer that was used by a grandparent. Homes help us to be safe when weather is harsh. Homes are a blessing.

And yet ... and yet ... A man – a scribe – comes to Jesus and offers to follow him -- literally to follow Jesus wherever he goes. What has he seen in Jesus, that makes him say this? What is so compelling? Has he heard Jesus’ teachings? Has he seen a miracle or two? Does he simply feel seen and known and loved whenever Jesus looks at him? Whatever it is, this scribe believes that he is ready to make a change in his life, to become a student of this teacher. To follow Jesus.

Now, Jesus has been looking for followers. In fact, at this point in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus hasn’t called all twelve of his disciples yet. So, you would think that this is the kind of offer that Jesus would welcome. “I will follow you,” the man says, not just theoretically, not just in spirit, but “follow you wherever you go.” But Jesus responds, “I have no place to lay my head.”

Notice that Jesus doesn’t tell the man not to follow. He merely wants the man to understand the cost. To be a follower of Jesus means no longer to be rooted in earthly places, but to be rooted in God. And this commitment comes with a cost. It can mean giving up home and family. It can mean a cross at the end of the road.

It is easy to accept Jesus’ unconditional welcome, isn’t it? And forgiveness, and another chance to get it right? It is easy to receive God’s comfort in times of sorrow.

It is harder to consider the cost of following Jesus. I can't tell you what that cost will be for you. I know some of what it has cost me to respond to God's call to ministry here, to be a pastor in this church that I love, long after the time that I thought I would be a full-time grandmother, baking cookies and attending soccer games. I know that my life would not be complete if I had missed the chance for ministry here.

I have seen the cost of discipleship in others' lives as well. I grew up during the Viet Nam War, as many of you did. And I saw the moral wrestling that men did, who felt a duty to the nation and also a Christian obligation not to kill. Trying to find the right place to stand in a moral minefield, knowing that a wrong step could cost them their lives, or their souls. In the end, the men I knew made different choices, but the internal struggle was the same for all of them. That moral wrestling was a cost of discipleship.

The costs of discipleship are not always so obvious. They appear more gradually. When we follow Jesus, we are called to whole and holy lives, and over time the parts of our lives that don't fit simply fall away. Only when we look back can we see that being Christian has changed us, and those changes don't feel like loss at all.

I do not know what the cost of discipleship has been for you, or what it will be tomorrow. I do know that God has a claim on each of us, and to be fully rooted in that claim is life-giving. Then, no matter where we lay our heads, we will not be homeless, for our home will be in the Lord, who made heaven and earth, who has known us since the beginning of time, and who holds us in the palm of God's hand.

Amen