

The Chasm We Build: *Homeless Jesus* and the Call to “Be With”

Timothy Schmalz’s sculpture is a visual sermon on Matthew 25: “As you did it to one of the least of my brothers, you did it to me.” He hopes the housed will see Christ in their homeless neighbors, while the unhoused will find comfort in



Timothy P. Schmalz, Jesus the Homeless (2012). Bronze 36 x 24 x 84 inches. The first cast is located at Regis College in Toronto. Casts now in more than fifty cities worldwide

Christ’s shared suffering. Schmalz expects recognition to unfold gradually. First, mistaking it as a real person, then as a sculpture, and finally as a depiction of Jesus Christ.

The first churches offered the initial cast declined because appreciation “was not unanimous,” so it was eventually placed at Regis College in Toronto. The first U.S. cast was placed at a church in an affluent Charlotte, North Carolina, neighborhood where some residents objected that it demeaned the area. One woman called the police mistaking it for an actual homeless person; another wrote that it “creeped him out.” In Westminster, Greater London, a proposed installation was rejected for failing to “maintain or improve” the area’s appearance.

Jesus confronts this attitude in Luke 16:19-31. An unnamed rich man lived in luxury every day while Lazarus, a poor man covered in sores, begged at his gate, yet the rich man was blind to his suffering. Both men die. Since Luke writes for a Hellenistic audience, the scene belongs less to later images of Hell than to the world of Hades: the rich man suffers in hot, dry torment, separated by a great chasm from Abraham and Lazarus. Still treating Lazarus as beneath him, he begs Abraham, “Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue.” Abraham replies that the chasm between them cannot be crossed. Even in torment, the unnamed man sees Lazarus as less deserving of comfort than he is. The parable gives this attitude architectural form: first a gate, then a chasm.

The chasm is not ancient history. The same impulse appears in the rejection of this sculpture. We still build it whenever we keep poverty invisible: through laws that push the poor out of sight, highways that separate poverty from wealth, gated communities that remove the af-

fluent from a shared public life, and hostile architecture, like park benches with four armrests, that denies rest.

Against this impulse to separate and conceal, Sam Wells reminds us that Christian life is not only about working for people or even working with them. It is also, and most deeply, about being with them. Wells describes three approaches to responding to homelessness. “Working for” means acting on someone’s behalf, such as raising awareness or creating programs. “Working with” means partnering with people as in community shelters or organizing. But “being with” might be as simple as sitting down for coffee and conversation. This approach centers the person without assuming he or she is first a problem to be fixed. Wells then compares these approaches to the shape of Jesus’ life. Jesus spent one week in Jerusalem “working for” humanity through his death and resurrection, three years in Galilee “working with” humanity through teaching, healing, and forming a community, and nearly thirty years in Nazareth “being with” humanity in ordinary life. In other words, the incarnate life of Jesus was roughly 1% working for, 9% working with, and 90% “being with” us, not only as Messiah, but as one of us.

Gayle L. Goudy, Ph. D.
(gaylegoudy@gmail.com)

This reflection grew out of a recent Education for Ministry, or EfM, conversation. EfM is a four-year program of theological reflection for laypeople. As an EfM mentor, I would love to see more people join a group next year. Classes forming now!