

# Looking Into the Face of Jesus

Dear Friends,

The first time I saw the Homeless Jesus sculpture by Timothy Schmalz, I was immediately impressed. Here was a visual representation of Jesus on a park bench wrapped in a blanket. You know that this life size sculpture is Jesus, because of the visible wounds in the feet and that Jesus said in Matthew 8:20, "Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay His head."

When one looks closely at the sculpture, they will see that there is no face on the sculpture. I believe this is the case because as the Holy Spirit moved on Timothy Schmalz, like all art inspired by the Holy Spirit, its intention is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. In this case, the comfortable are the rich and powerful, who consider the homeless a nuisance and need to be reminded that these are the ones Jesus identified with when He came to earth.

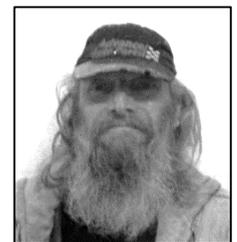


When I first looked under the blanket of the sculpture, and saw no face, I was troubled to the extent I didn't want to look again. It wasn't until the Holy Spirit spoke to me two days later, that if I was going to see the face of Jesus in the homeless Jesus sculpture, I would have to look into the face of the homeless. Only then would I begin to see the face of Jesus.

In 2 Chronicles 7:14, we are called to "...pray and seek" the face of God. David says to God in Psalm 27:8, "Your face will I seek." To seek the face of God means to draw near to God and develop a relationship with Him. Yet how do we see the face of one we cannot see, and who said in Exodus 33:20 that no one can see His face and live.

The beginning of John's Gospel tells us that Jesus the Homeless one is the Word of God who became flesh and "we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Because of Jesus willingness to leave His home in heaven and shed His blood on Earth so our sins can be forgiven we can have a nearness with God that was not possible before. This coming of Jesus the Homeless One provides the breakthrough we need if we want to see the face of God and draw near to Him. In John 14:6 Jesus declares, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

Looking into the face of Jesus, the homeless one, means looking into a face like Bill's. Bill is a tall, lanky individual who could pass for Abraham Lincoln, except Bill doesn't have a beard on his face, he has got a bush. Over three years ago, Bill, who was homeless and living in his car, had a traffic accident. It wasn't any ordinary traffic accident. Bill had run into a police car operated by one of the ninety municipalities in St. Louis County. As you would expect, Bill was taken in for booking. But poor Bill, even the police didn't want him. Instead, like so many, Bill was dumped by the police at the only walk in shelter left in Mid-America, the New Life Evangelistic Center



at 1411 Locust Street. For weeks, Bill never even made it into the front door. Because the City of St. Louis had declared war on the homeless encampments along the riverfront, and had destroyed Hapeville, Sparta, Dignity Harbor, and other places of refuge for the homeless, these homeless refugees were now sleeping on the sidewalks outside the 1411 Locust building.

It was late summer, and Bill joined those sleeping on the sidewalks surrounding the 1411 Locust building. Although it was hard sleeping on the sidewalk, Bill made new friends, and was starting to get a sense of belonging. It was then that the city authorities directed the police to move in and clear the sidewalks. Barricades were put up which remain to this day. It was then that Bill finally came into 1411 Locust for shelter. Shortly thereafter, he joined the New Life community. Today Bill is part of the NLEC team that work all night at 1411 Locust receiving the homeless men, women and children. When I look into the face of Bill, I know I am looking into the face of the homeless Jesus who said, "As often as you have done it for the least of these even so you have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40).

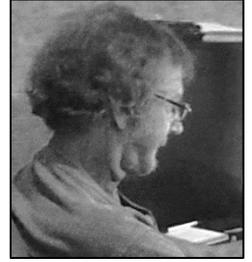
It is much easier to recognize the face of Jesus in that homeless person once they have had the breath of the Holy Spirit blown into their tired worn out lives. The Comanche Indians, would ride into a herd of wild horses and then proceed to rope them one by one. The rope would be pulled so tight that the horse would fall to the ground almost choked to death. At that point the Comanche Indian would dismount from his horse and run up to the stricken animal which was gasping for air and begin to blow into the horse's nostrils. After while the horse that was previously choking would get up and proceed to let the Indian ride it.

It is easy for us to look back into history and view this act of breaking horses as being an inhuman action on the part of a primitive people. The question is how will future generations view our culture where a man or woman who after being choked by a host of life events to the point they get caught up into a wide range of addictions, depression, or chronic illness are left with no place to fall once they end up homeless. These individuals are often left on the streets to suffer alone as they are pushed from place to place not allowed to sleep anywhere.

As the Holy Spirit desires to breathe His life within these suffering people even the church doors are slammed shut to the homeless. It is then that the Spirit of God cries out, "Who will look into the face of my broken children and see the face of Jesus who also declared, 'as often as you have not done it to the least of these even so you have not done it unto me'" (Matt. 25:45).

When people were homeless, hurting and in need of a healing, the homeless Jesus was there. He was there for them, just like he was for Steve when Steve was driven out of his hometown of Belleville, IL. Steve had to leave town because of the hostility and apathy that was directed toward the homeless in that community. It was a fear of the local authorities that caused the churches to lock their doors to the homeless at night, and then open them to host a memorial service after the homeless had died. Steve didn't want a memorial service, he wanted a place to sleep so he fled to the only sanctuary open to him, which was at 1411 Locust in St. Louis.

If you look into the face of Steve, in search of the face of Jesus the homeless one, you will see a face where a chunk of Steve's cancer ridden jaw has been removed and replaced with a piece from his leg. Even though Steve still lives with the pain and must undergo chemotherapy, he is determined to be a part of the New Life community where he edits programs and does camera work at KNLC TV 24. It is because I have looked into Steve's face, that I have seen the homeless face of Jesus. When I was told that churches and groups were continuing to meet after 5 long years in Belleville to further discuss how to provide shelter for the homeless, my immediate reaction was, "just open an overnight sanctuary for the homeless like Jesus told us to do and if the local authorities try to shut it down, sue them in federal court."



Those who have looked into the face of the homeless Jesus, are a people who are sold out to Jesus to the extent they will declare in councils and in the federal courts, like Peter and John did in Acts 4:19 & 20, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." Then in Acts 5:29 when Peter and the other apostles appeared again before the council they declared, "We ought to obey God rather than men." Just like the disciples who could not be silenced nor stopped when it came to proclaiming the gospel in word and deed, we must NOT stop at any cost.

When we look into the face of the homeless Jesus and are reminded of the love He has demonstrated for each of us we will experience a new determination to see that every homeless person has a place to sleep at night. As we see the nail pierced feet in the Homeless Jesus sculpture and continue to seek the face of Jesus, we will desire that Paul's prayer of Ephesians 3:17-19 be answered in our lives. There Paul prays, "...that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

How we need to let the fullness of God sweep over us as we look into the face of those like Marsa, who came to the sanctuary at 1411 Locust, broken, hurting and homeless. Although her body was riddled with pain, Marsa grew daily in her knowledge of God's love as she allowed that pain to draw her further and further into the fullness of God. Marsa by receiving sanctuary and letting the Holy Spirit breathe new life within her has become had opened the door of her heart to Jesus, the full Divine One, who became the human homeless Jesus out of love for all of us.



Now, Jesus the homeless one, is knocking on the door of your heart. He is desiring to come in and dwell within you. As the greed of this world strives to shut the doors of compassion, Jesus sends His Holy Spirit to help you resist such a hardening of your heart. He continues to patiently knock, inviting you to join His movement of radical resistance by surrendering totally to Him. This surrender involves standing in solidarity with society's outcasts of homeless people.

When you accept the homeless Jesus into your life and dare to look into the face of the homeless you will be converted from being a person in whom the snake of greed resides into one whom the compassion of Christ will infuse new holy boldness. As you obey the scriptures, and provide the refuge of shelter the scriptures command, you will stand firm and resist the threats of those who scream, "Not in my back yard or neighborhood will that shelter open!"

When you open a place of refuge to the homeless Jesus, in spite of what the local authorities might say, you will be blessed to see the face of Jesus in those the hospitals will send to your door. You will meet individuals like Jeanette, who was in a coma when the hospital sent her to New Life Evangelistic Center. It took Jeanette a week to even become conscious where she was at. Those who look into Jeanette's face as she moves in her wheel chair down the hallway will see the face of the homeless Jesus.



Who is this homeless Jesus? He is a tangible revelation of God's love. Instead of just sending us messages of love written on paper, God chose to demonstrate His love by sending His Son into the world as a homeless child. This child was born in a stable and placed in a manger feeding trough. Jesus, the homeless one, was sent by His Father Yahweh-Elohim, the God of the Exodus, who sides with the poor against the rich. Jesus' name means the deliverer. He never wrote a word, except in the sand. Perhaps the reason for this is He didn't want people just sitting around having Bible studies, when they should be living at His message of compassion and hope.

The homeless Jesus believed in lifestyle evangelism. He advocated the beloved community of God, which He referred to as the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33). Those who became a part of this beloved community worked to renounce greed, violence, and other dead gods, lest they become traitors like Judas.

To encounter the homeless Jesus is to accept the risen Christ, who is calling His disciples to join a resistance movement that will fight an extreme, capitalistic system that is intent by its greed to gut the gospel of its message of compassion. Those born again into the love of the homeless Jesus come to the realization that Jesus not only stood with the outcasts, but is a revelation of the God of the outcasts.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said that there is an arch in the universe that bends toward justice. This arch is the arm of God reaching out to the downtrodden and to the homeless ones like Glenna. It is the hand of the caring woman who approached Glenna that day as she sat on that curb in St. Louis County planning her suicide. Glenna was fed up with being treated like an animal, just because she no longer had a home. The question was no longer whether or not she would take her own life, but how she would do it. Then there was the question of what would happen to her dog, who was accompanying Glenna as she tried to find a place to sleep each night. Sleep deprivation was taking its toll. Pushed from place to place with nowhere to sleep, Glenna just wanted to die.

In the midst of her death wish, the arm of God reached out to her in the form of a caring individual. This child of God, instead of seeing a ragged, un-showered, worn out homeless nuisance, saw the face of the homeless Jesus as she looked upon Glenna. This angel didn't call the police to come and tell Glenna to move on. Instead, she approached Glenna with the love of Jesus flowing through her. She got something for Glenna to eat, took her to the 1411 Locust sanctuary for the homeless, and even cared for Glenna's dog.



The question is, where do the angels and the Good Samaritans send those that they find hurting if the last remaining sanctuary at 1411 Locust Street does not remain open? When will the churches, hospitals, police departments and Good Samaritans who drop the homeless like Glenna off daily at 1411 Locust Street rise up and fight the principalities and powers that are trying to close this last remaining walk in shelter?

When I walk through the lobby of 1411 Locust and see the five foot replica of the homeless Jesus sculpture, I am reminded that I am not just dealing with desperate, homeless individuals who come to the door for help, but Jesus and the angels that Hebrews 13:2 says we will be entertaining.

On December 23, 2014 the St. Louis Board of Public Service declared that the homeless Jesus, along with the angels and God's homeless children were a public nuisance. They ordered New Life Evangelistic Center to provide residency to only 32 homeless people each night. This board, which was hand-picked by the Mayor of St. Louis, was surrendering to the demands of neighboring condominium and parking lot owners, who wanted NLEC to put individuals like Bill, Glenna, Steve, Marsa and Jeanette back out on the streets homeless.

When this demand by the Board of Public Service for the rich was issued, two days before the celebration of the holy and homeless Christ child, the faces of homeless children like Joseph, Raymond and Jade flashed before me. These children had been living in a van with their grandmother before they came for sanctuary at 1411 Locust.



It wasn't always that way. Prior to their grandfather's death, they had resided together in a lovely home in St. Louis County. Then Rita's husband died, leaving Rita with the grandchildren to raise.

New Life Evangelistic Center could not let the city put these children back on the streets. As a result NLEC filed a lawsuit in the 8<sup>th</sup> Circuit Federal Court to stop the inhuman actions of the City of St. Louis. NLEC's attorney, who is a specialist in the Religious, Institutional and Personalization Act, says that the Mayor's office has 4 city attorneys assigned to this case in hopes that they can defeat NLEC's efforts to be sure room is available to the homeless Jesus, His angels, and His homeless children who come in need of shelter in the middle of the night.

At New Life Evangelistic center, the overnight sanctuary for the homeless remains open to everyone in need because we have looked into the face of Jesus the homeless. We have seen His face as we have looked into the face of Karen and her three teenage children who came for shelter after they lost their home in Ferguson, MO. Karen found herself without shelter, not only because there is not a single walk-in shelter in St. Louis County, and all the city shelters were full, but also because other homeless shelters did not take teenage boys. The only place available to Karen and her teenage children was 1411 Locust.



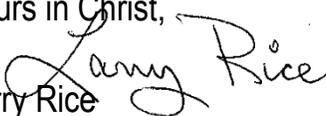
Looking into the face of the homeless Jesus by getting to know each homeless person as a child of God, and not a statistic, enables the followers of the homeless Jesus to get to know Him in a more intimate way. It fills them with the power of the Holy Spirit to the extent they can courageously do the work of God without being paralyzed by fear of those who don't want Jesus, His angels or His homeless children in their neighborhoods.

It is often much more challenging to see the face of Jesus in the homeless one who is unshaven, un-showered, and reeks with the putrid smell of urine. Add to that a rebellious attitude and instead of feeling drawn into the presence of Christ it is natural to let contempt towards the homeless one take over. As this happens the compassionate one seeking to witness Jesus in the face of the homeless must strive to see God's grace and hospitality extended to us daily. We must never forget that while we stunk with sin, clothed in our filthy rags of self-righteousness, the Holy One Jesus became homeless here on earth where He died and rose to set us free from sin.

Jesus, the one who gave up His home in heaven to become the homeless Jesus, now invites us to recognize Him in the lives of the homeless. As we become involved in their personal struggles, we are reminded daily of God's patience toward us. Remembering the homeless Jesus, we are free to speak the truth in love to the homeless, pointing out from God's word, those oppressive forces in their lives which hold them in bondage. Filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, and the word of God, we are also free to speak truth to the oppressive powers of governing authorities that want to keep torturing the homeless night after night with sleep deprivation as they are driven out of the parks, the homeless encampments, and now the last place of refuge remaining for them.

Those beholding the face of the homeless Jesus, and following the mandates of the scriptures, will personally respond to Jesus, the homeless one, and daily strive to let His light and love shine through them.

That is the challenge that God gives each of us in this time and place where discrimination has become common against those that Jesus said, "As often as you have done it to the least of these, even so you have done it unto me" (Matthew 23:40).

Yours in Christ,  
  
Larry Rice

