

**This World is Not My Home
Isaiah 58 & 65
Don Lincoln**

In most sermons, I try to make a life connection with the topic at hand. But with affordable housing and homelessness, my personal experience is pretty limited.

My induction into the Order of the Arrow in Boy Scouts included a day and a night alone in the wilderness. Dropped off in a dark woods a hundred yards from any other scout, I had to find shelter for the night, and forage for food the next day. I ate dandelion greens, the roots of Queen Ann's Lace, which taste like carrots. I fashioned a spear and secured frog legs for dinner that night. But 24 hours later I was in a house with heat, toilets and a full refrigerator.

I slept in a car once. Four of us did, actually. I was in college; went skiing in Vermont, and on the way back to Cincinnati got caught in a severe blizzard on the New York State Thruway. We pulled under an overpass, put on all our ski clothes, wrapped ourselves in sleeping bags, and rode out the storm huddled together in a Ford Station wagon. We were plenty warm – just not real comfortable. I was home in bed the next day.

When I got my first job in 1980, interest rates on home loans were 18%. That pushed the concept of “affordable housing.” I rented one side of a two-story colonial duplex for \$400 a month, until a couple from the church I was serving offered a personal loan at 12% on the house they were selling. \$400 was 40% of my monthly gross income – a little bit higher than the ratio they want you to have for a home payment, but it was doable.

In other words – I don't have a clue. I do NOT have a clue. No idea what it's like to not have a home, to live on the street; or make such a modest wage that my choice is either food or shelter; gas to get to work or a decent apartment. I don't know what it's like to sleep in a car – with my family – for nights on end. Most of us in here don't or haven't. But there are people in this community who do; who know one of those realities every single night. Night after night.

We know it's true because in the three years we've been hosting Family Promise along with a dozen other churches – four weeks out of the year where families sleep in our building because they have nowhere to go – we've never had a week when we've been hosting that there hasn't been somebody who needed to be in our building.

Some years ago, a colleague in Marin County, California, one of the four most expensive counties in the US in which to live, told me less than 10% of people earning the median income in his area could afford to buy a home. “In human terms,” he said, “that means most of our teachers, firefighters, and nurses cannot afford to live here on their salary.”

Scripture he said, tells us to love our neighbor as our self. He wrote, “The problem is, the neighbors whom we love and cherish the most, those who educate our children, who protect us from harm, who heal our wounds – won’t be our neighbors unless I do something about it. They just can’t afford to live here.”

I probably said something like, “Thank God I don’t live in California. That’s like Manhattan. Crazy expensive!” Well....Chester County is the 24th wealthiest county in the nation. Out of 3,242 counties and county equivalents. 24th. That’s in the top seven tenths of one percent. Which is why I shouldn’t have been **as surprised as I was** when the need for affordable housing was what our Vision Quest team heard most from people in the region.

One of the greatest gifts coach Bill Wilson gave us in our vision process was the charge to talk to stakeholders in this community. So our team went out to talk with university administration; hospital president; county commissioners; chamber of commerce officials, community foundation leaders, county health services, service agencies, superintendents of schools.

Dozens and dozens of interviews were conducted by the Vision Team – and what refrain kept being voiced? Over and over – affordable housing. Affordable housing. Eliminating homelessness and providing affordable housing.

Westminster is no stranger to housing ministries. We helped start the area’s Habitat for Humanity chapter in 1989 and sponsored our first Habitat House in 1998 and have been running with it ever since. Habitat has received support from Westminster for nearly 30 years. We’ve had Good Works teams rehabbing houses for more than 10 years and financially supported Good Works since 2004.

But is there more for this congregation?

In today’s text, the prophet has a vision of a new heavens and a new earth – picturing for us out loud what that newness might look like. His words are a vivid representation of a transformed environment: peoples, habitations, and nature, all woven into a complex relationship of wholeness and well being.¹

Sometimes I think when we hear a text say “For I am about to create a new heavens and a new earth,” it sounds like another place – like the next life. We know of religion that focuses on pie in the sky, peace in the hereafter; that sings the old song, “This World is not my home, I’m just a passin’ through.” **That religion** leans toward Marx’s opiate of the people; faith as an escape from real life. And that kind of religion actually

undermines social reform because it disables our hearts and our minds from acting with determination and courage on behalf of God's order of justice in the present day world in the here and the now.

But this text isn't other worldly. The prophet describes real world transformation; low infant mortality, houses to live in, vineyards to plant, and fruit to eat. These are the very real outworkings of God's messianic activity in the world. Saving, redeeming, renewing, reconciling. That activity is not just ethereal, spiritual reality. It can be felt. It can be touched. It can be seen. It can be heard. No surprise. Jesus fed the hungry. Jesus healed the sick. Jesus welcomed the stranger and the outcast. This world IS our home – and everyone in it deserves a home in which to live!

Such concrete images in scripture invite us as a congregation to ponder how it is we are called to participate in God's new creation, "on earth as it is in heaven" as we pray each week in the Lord's prayer.

Just 4 years ago, the very first installation of Timothy Schmalz's sculpture took place in Davidson, NC. Davidson, not unlike West Chester, is a lovely small, upscale college town; a bedroom community just outside of metro Charlotte, NC. Home to Davidson College, a very fine Presbyterian school.

On a bench in front of the St. Alban's Episcopal Church in Davidson, is found this Sculpture.

From a distance, particularly in the evening, or after nightfall, it looks very much like what some would call a vagrant, sleeping on a bench. In fact in the first week, the police received numerous calls to go "take care of the problem."



The police arrived, only to find that it was not actually a live person, but a sculpture. But it's not until you get close, and you see the nail marks on the feet peeking from under the blanket, that you realize who it's depicting.

One letter to the editor complained that the statue didn't belong. "We don't want people driving into our beautiful, reasonably upscale neighborhood and seeing an ugly homeless person sleeping on a park bench." Another person was offended by the suggestion from the sculpture that there were actually poor people in their town.



Some residents suggested the sculpture is in poor taste in its depiction of Jesus, particularly as a homeless person. I'm guessing they never heard Jesus' words, "Foxes may have holes, and the birds of the air have their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

Someone else said "Jesus is not a vagrant, and should not be pictured as someone who needs our help." Perhaps they've never heard Jesus say, "When I was hungry, you fed me; when I was naked, you clothed me; when I was sick and in prison, you visited me. Whenever you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me."



Someone else mentioned, however, that it's pretty nice that Tim Schmalz created his sculpture with room for one more on the bench.....

That's an installation of the sculpture in Washington, D.C.

God-Sized Dream #3 – We work toward affordable housing – states that Westminster takes a leadership role in the community to ensure that no one is forced to live in substandard, unsafe

housing or experiences homelessness. That's a tall order. Even just to be the lead.

Four years ago, my pastors group was hosted by the pastor of the Lewinsville Presbyterian Church, in McLean, VA. McLean, VA, nice, upscale, northern Virginia neighborhood outside of DC. The pastor there, Debbie McKinley, is a close friend. One of the things we toured while in Lewinsville was the Lewinsville Retirement Residence – 143 apartments on 4 acres – affordable housing for seniors – built next door to the church on church owned property. I was sharing that story probably a year ago here and learned that the mother of a Westminster member actually lived in that facility some years ago.

Affordable housing in a community where it's hard to find. Built by a church.

Just dream with me a minute. Is it possible Westminster could leverage some of its land and do something similar? Could you imagine a 99 year, one-dollar-a-year-lease on 5 acres for 100 apartments next door – affordable housing for Seniors? People who cleaned homes, who grew up in West Chester but cannot retire in West Chester because there is no where they can afford. And could we reserve 4 of those apartments for Family Promise, so people wouldn't have to be hauled from church to church? They would actually have a place to stay until they got their feet on the ground. Could we set one apartment aside for missionaries home on furlough? Or for a refugee family as their first entrée into life, being welcomed by this congregation into this country?

Big dreams. I don't know what's possible. But that's the kind of thing this dream is about.

But you don't have to wait for that big a dream to make a difference. November 10 is our next Habitat work day. You'll find the announcement in the news and events, titled "Strap On Your Toolbelts." If you're interested, get your smart phone out right now, find that announcement with Burt Rothenberger's email in it, and send him an email.

This is how Westminster leads in this community. So that people have a safe, decent, affordable place to live. "They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall be the days of my people and my chosen shall enjoy the work of their hands." (Isaiah 65.....)

May it be so.

1. Nelson Rivera, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol IV, Proper 28, Isaiah 65: 17-25.