

When Jesus offends just by being himself

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

April 16, 2014

Looks like *Jesus the Homeless* is coming to Chicago. [Erica Demarest reports](#) that the local Catholic Charities office plans to put up one of Timothy Schmalz's sculptures—which depict an unkempt Jesus, with stigmata, sleeping on a park bench—this spring.

*Weekend Edition* [did a segment Sunday](#) on the sculpture at St. Alban's Episcopal in Davidson, North Carolina. Apparently some locals aren't fans:

The reaction was immediate. Some loved it; some didn't.

"One woman from the neighborhood actually called police the first time she drove by," says David Boraks, editor of DavidsonNews.net. "She thought it was an actual homeless person."

That's right. Somebody called the cops on Jesus.

"Another neighbor, who lives a couple of doors down from the church, wrote us a letter to the editor saying it creeps him out," Boraks added.

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.

It's a strange reaction, and not just for all the obvious biblical and theological reasons. It's striking that the mere image of a homeless person is offensive to people. It's as if we can't even look at the representation of a poor person without jumping to all our highly charged moral and political debates about poverty. But *Jesus the Homeless* isn't protesting cuts to shelter budgets or veterans' services or mental health care. He isn't raising anybody's taxes to fund the welfare state. He's just existing, visibly. And [as with Sesame Street's Lily character](#), this very existence manages to bother people.

But thankfully, not necessarily very many of them. The comment thread on [the Charlotte NBC affiliate's story](#) is very pro- the statue. The NPR segment reflects this too, though it sort of buries the lede—the quote above only cites two actual humans, along with the unnamed "some neighbors" who are offended on behalf of a God they don't seem to have read much about. At the end, NPR adds this:

Back at St. Alban's in Davidson, the rector reports that the *Jesus the Homeless* statue has earned more followers than detractors. It is now common, he says, to see people come, sit on the bench, rest their hand on the bronze feet and pray.

I look forward to doing the same once there's a homeless Jesus sculpture here in Chicago.