

This sermon is offered in honor of the guest preachers who took part in *In the Beginning was the Word*.

Now that the pulpit dedication is over, and the guest preachers have offered their words, I want to offer a couple of thoughts about the new pulpit. First, it was wonderful to honor Truman in this way. Secondly, it was wonderful because it was a communal effort—not just given by one or two, but by so many of us. And finally: it turned out well! What a relief. A common compliment that I have heard is that it looks like it belongs here. It looks like it has always been here.

It looks like it has always been here. Think about those words in regard to our gospel reading today. That is the confounding statement made at the end of the parable of the sheep and the goats. That is the surprising fact, not about this pulpit, but about the faith of those loved by the Shepherd, that their faith *looked like it had always been there*. They weren't rewarded for their actions, not exactly, but instead for what they had always done. For what they had always been.

Tom Long, a professor of mine at Emory, says that every parable of Jesus contains a trap door. The moment you think you have solved the riddle and discovered the parable's

meaning is precisely the moment when you fall through the trap door into an unexpected, broader reality. I wonder if that's true. I know that some of Jesus' parables are difficult to understand. I feel like I spend my life falling through the trap door! But I am not sure if this one is really that hard to solve. You and I find Christ, not just in spiritual wanderings, but when we love and serve, especially when we love and serve the least of these. That much is plain.

I remember when I was a seminary student and I took a job at the Presbyterian Church working as a mentor in their homeless ministry. Imagine me trying to be a mentor to homeless people. I had no idea what their lives were like. But I tried to love them. I can remember getting in my car to drive eight tenths of a mile home and I would just sit there and cry. But I found Christ there, to be sure.

Any of us who have gone with our Outreach Committee to work with B-Safe or Epiphany School or the children at Sts. A and M knows how true it is, that we find Christ in those works of feeding and clothing and caring.

In my last church, we did a lot of work in the Dominican Republic. And it wasn't in Punta Cana! Interestingly, in the DR, the Catholics are the wealthy, educated people, and the Episcopalians are poor. We were in Azua, which is a poor

town in a poor part of the country. And the Church of the Reconciliation is in a poor part of town. Then our work at Reconciliation led us to the Church of the Holy Spirit in Las Carreras, which was even poorer. But the poorer it got, the more we seemed to find Christ. It seemed like we always returned reinforcing and having reinforced the lesson of this parable, that Christ still lives among the poor of the earth.

And that much is plain, that Christ lives among the poor of the earth. Only right there, that's the trap door! It is the point that we take from this parable, and perhaps I should say, it is not a bad point to take. But that doesn't really get at the essence of what Jesus is teaching here. *We meet him in the poor. We miss him when we neglect the stranger.* But in the end that isn't the point. No, the parable ends with astonishment. It is the astonishment of those on both sides who didn't know what they were doing. That is the trap door; that is the ultimate point. Those sheep who recognized Christ, just like those goats who did not, shared in the same fate, that they didn't really know what they were doing!

Like this pulpit, if it is true, the point is how something belonged. It looked like it had always been there. The faith of the sheep was a faith that was always there, even if they didn't understand why. That's what the great "reveal" in the parable says to me. Christ had always been in them, and they

had been in him. The reveal wasn't just to teach them how, as much as it was to unmask the beautiful hope that lived in them. You see, if that is true, the greater reveal—the true trap door—is about how the Christian life is about being. It is formed by imitating Jesus, but it has its fulfillment—not in naming those accomplishments—but in being like he is. That is a bit confounding, I know. But I think that is exactly the mystery this parable invites us to consider.

At a certain point, we realize that we do everything for Christ and for the Kingdom of Heaven that he brought us... and... at a certain point, we realize that we do it, for no other reason than simply because his Kingdom lives in us. And there is nothing else that we could do. It flows from our being in him. That is the great mystery that lives in us.

You will remember the end of the book, *A River Runs Through It*. It is a book that says that religion and fly fishing are a lot alike. I don't know much about fishing, but what I remember about the book is the end, how the Presbyterian minister is sitting by the river and his son is fishing, and he is reading the beginning of John's gospel in his New Testament. "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God, and the word was made flesh and dwelt among us." And he realizes, finally at the end of his life, how there has been this eternal dance of

things that he understands and things that he doesn't understand, things that he has done and things left undone, things that had been before him and things that would come after him. And finally, he realizes how he has been... simply... a part of them. Like the river that runs through the wild and gorgeous landscape of Montana, that is the way in which he is a part of the life of God, and that is the way in which the life of God is in him.

I think that is the point of this final teaching of Jesus, contained in Matthew as his final parable, written as his last teaching before his death, a word of hope to those who had followed him, that he would live in them.

He would live in them in the good they would do on his behalf. But it would progress beyond that. It was not just the good that they did, but the good that they would be because of him. He would live in them in every moment that pushed them beyond even those good things that they understood. Because Christ's good lives beyond our comprehension!

I saw that this week. You might have seen a story about a woman who got stranded outside of Philadelphia. She she ran out of gas on I-95, and didn't have any money, so she got out of her to go and ask for help. A homeless veteran stopped her on the side of the road and told her what she was

doing wasn't safe. He told her to get back in her car and to lock the door. He had twenty dollars someone had given him, so he went and bought her gas with it. She was so thankful that she publicized the good he had done and raised money for him. As of last night, she had raised \$360,000 for him!

The moment that struck me—the moment that welcomed me through the trap door of Jesus' teaching— was an interview with this homeless veteran. When they filmed it, the young woman had raised much less than \$360,000, but he was already astonished by it. He is from NC, so he kept saying, Y'ALL, again and again. (I understand, I do that sometimes, too.) He was absolutely floored how this simple act of kindness, giving the little he had, resulted in a chorus of generosity on his behalf. And that, I think, is the kind of generosity Jesus has in mind here. The reporter kept trying to make sense of it and to find a reason. They asked him, was it his training as a nurse, or his work as a paramedic, his service as a veteran, even his time as a homeless person, that drove him to do it? And he said simply, no. He didn't know why. He just knew it was the right thing to do.

That, my friends, is the point of this parable. That is what it means to follow Christ, even—especially— when do not

know why. His kingdom has now come to live in us, and now, there is nothing else that we could do.

Oh God, who didst wonderfully create, and yet more wonderfully didst restore, the dignity of human nature:
Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, thy Son our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.