Last Sunday after Pentecost
November 22, 2026 • 10:30am
Trinity Episcopal Church • New Orleans, LA

The Rev. E. Gary Taylor

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, Amen.

I want to begin this morning talking about animals. You can't go wrong talking about animals.

With the possible exception of spiders or snakes, pretty much every animal is cute when it's young. And pretty much every animal brings out our desire to care for it when it's hurt or hungry. It's easy for me to see the hand of God in a majestic eagle or a lowly meerkat in a fuzzy caterpillar or a towering giraffe.

Loving animals is easy. People? Well, they can be a bit more complicated. I wonder how many of you have actually met a sheep or a goat.

I mean in person. And I don't mean at the zoo where animals have everything brought to them and people come by all day to admire them. I mean sheep and goats in the field.

Earthy, woolen creatures with gnarly hooves and that smell. I suppose that's what you raise when you get close enough to a bunch of farm animals or to most anything else in life from that world. From the other side of the fence, it's just a scene in a picture book.

Up close, one's limping. Another's missing a bit of an ear. Everyone needs a bath.

The whole business is pretty messy. One thing about sheep is that they learn to recognize their shepherd's voice. Of all the voices a sheep might hear, there's one that means, come on, you can come this way, I'm going ahead of you.

Spend a little time with a first grader who's been asked to walk into a room full of people he doesn't know. You can stand behind him and say, go on, it's fine, all morning, but take his hand and go in first and see what happens. It's a lovely image for God.

The Lord is my shepherd, psalmist says. I know my own and my own know me, Jesus says. And in Ezekiel this morning, God says, in effect, I'll go myself.

I'll find the one who's wandered off. I'll bind up the one who's injured. I'll see to the weak one.

I could happily preach on that all day. Unfortunately for me, Ezekiel keeps talking. I will feed them with justice, God says.

The Hebrew word for justice is mishpat. In biblical Hebrew, mishpat means, among other things, social justice, and also proper order, as in the way things are meant to be. Mishpat seems an odd thing to feed a sheep, you might think, until Ezekiel tells us what's been going on in the pasture.

Some of the bigger, stronger animals have been pushing with flank and shoulder, butting the weaker ones with their horns until they've scattered. Imagine being the little ewe who's been trying all morning to get a drink. What would the shepherd's love look like to her? I suspect it would look like somebody finally getting that big fellow to move over.

And if I happen to be the big fellow, well, same shepherd, same love, a somewhat different experience, all to put things in the proper order. Which brings us to our rather uncomfortable story from Matthew on this last Sunday before Advent, Christ the King Sunday. The Son of Man comes in glory, the angels are with him, he takes his seat on the throne, and the sheep are sent one way and the goats another.

If you're anything like me, by the time we get to the end of the story, you're already starting to do a little private arithmetic. Let's see, I fed some people, I was pretty

kind to that stranger. Visiting people in prison, how much does that count? But listen again to how the story begins.

Jesus is describing who will be gathered in front of the throne. In Greek, it's ponte te ethni, all the nations, the peoples of the whole earth. And when the king says, I was hungry and you gave me food, the you in that is plural, as in, I was hungry and y'all gave me something to eat.

It makes a difference, doesn't it? We come to the story wondering, what sort of person am I? But Jesus offers a bigger question, what sort of people are we? We're doing a lot of thinking and talking these days about the people we are at Trinity Church as we prepare our parish profile and consider what we want and dream of in our next rector. The vestry retreat a few months back started with a long conversation about the history of Trinity Church and its role in the larger community of New Orleans. A theme that became clear as we piled on memory after memory was the resilience of our church to overcome setbacks.

A strength that none could doubt was the work of the Holy Spirit in this place. We, the collective humans that is, was, and will be Trinity Church have much to be proud of. But, of course, our history is not without fault, not without sin.

Reality up close is messy, yet God remains faithful to us, to all of us. As many have been working hard to put together the picture of Trinity Church that we will use to attract the next rector, we're quite naturally putting our best foot forward and what that looks like is enumerating the many, many ways that the people of Trinity Church have served and continue to serve people. This depiction of our church, we believe, will attract the strongest candidates, but more importantly, it defines our aspirations as a congregation.

Together, we wish to be sheep, and really quite often we are collectively good sheep, even if, honestly speaking, pretty much each of us individually have some distinctive goatish tendencies. You see, that's where the goats in our gospel today give me pause. Sheep or goats seems unrealistically binary to me, especially when we bring it down to individuals.

Who among us is all one way or all the other? Humans with free will will never be perfect. We all need the spiritual bath. Where I get myself in trouble is when I start wondering whether I've done enough good to get in.

Once I've asked it that way, I've pretty much left grace out of the picture. But listen to the words the king uses, inherit. Come inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundations of the world.

Think about that. Before any of these people had so much as made a sandwich for anybody, God had a kingdom prepared for them. That's grace.

God loved them first. Does it matter then whether I feed the person who's hungry? Well, ask the person who's hungry. It matters a great deal.

And the king loves that fellow enough to take what happened to him personally. Which brings us back to those surprised sheep. They don't remember seeing Jesus.

What they remember, presumably, is somebody who needed lunch. So they made lunch. That's who they are.

That's how they roll. They are kind because God loves them and that love has gotten into their hands. Up close, they're still imperfect.

But who they are, reflected in how they routinely, thoughtlessly roll, is deemed righteous. Now what about those rather pointed words at the end about eternal life and eternal punishment? I take them seriously. I suspect the disciples did too.

They knew their scriptures. They knew about Daniel who said that one day those who slept in the dust would wake, some to everlasting life and some to shame. As for whether that would actually happen, well, you could get quite an argument going back there and even in Jesus' day.

In fact, just three chapters back in Matthew, Jesus had precisely that argument with the Sadducees. So I wonder if the part that would have surprised the disciples is the part we sail right past. The king sits down on his throne.

All the nations gather before him and what does the king want to talk about? That time he was hungry. When were you hungry, Lord? That's what they want to know and that, I think, is the crux of the message. Here I am wondering what will happen to me when I die and Jesus has me thinking about somebody I walked past on the way to lunch.

Apparently that encounter mattered a good deal more than I knew. And if I turn around tomorrow and offer to buy that fellow lunch, have I improved my prospects for eternity? There I go again, doing my private arithmetic. The sheep in this story would be quite bewildered by the question.

Somebody was hungry. They had food and somewhere in the sharing of it, they were already keeping company with the king. I think our lens needs to shift to the understanding that eternal life begins quite a bit sooner than most of us imagine.

Listen to the way Jesus speaks in John's gospel. Whoever hears my word and trusts the one who sent me has eternal life, has present tense. John's gospel has Jesus saying on the night before he dies, now this is eternal life that they know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you've sent.

In biblical usage, knowing implies active ongoing relationship and trust, not just possessing intellectual facts. There's a phrase theologians use for this other way of thinking. The eternal now, the eternal life God promises us can already be lived right here today because the one who he hoped one day to see face to face is already keeping company with us.

And in our gospel reading today, Matthew tells us where to look to realize that. Lord, when was it that we saw you? Think of the scale of the story, all the nations of the earth, every angel in heaven, a throne of glory, and where does the king direct everyone's attention? To one, one of the least of these, one thirsty person, one

stranger a long way from home, one man in prison for whom a whole afternoon might be changed by the sight of somebody pulling up a chair, one act of kindness. I think that's why I hear in this story a judgment for us, not of us.

Jesus tells it while there's still time to question the road we're on, still time to make a change, still time to choose a life ordered in the way things are meant to be, still time to realize eternal life. And the shepherd who asks us to go into those places is willing to do for us what any of us would have done for that first grader, he goes on ahead. So listen for his voice this week and if you're wondering which way he went, look around for somebody who could use a little company, a drink of water, a bit of food, a word of kindness, go on over, pull up a chair.

You may find to your considerable surprise that the king is already there and he's been saving you a seat.