

The Good Shepherd and the Hireling
John 10: 11-18
Don Lincoln

A pastor I know announced his retirement three years in advance. In every sermon for those three years he described how hard he had worked for the congregation, how much he loved them, and how he was looking forward to retirement. By the time he retired half the people were so angry at him for talking about it every week, and the other half were so dysfunctional after 3 years of perpetual goodbye, they were ready to run him out of town when it was time to go.

I promise I won't talk about my retirement every Sunday for the next 15, 18, months, however long it is. But since this is my first time in the pulpit since my announcement, I won't completely ignore that I've told this congregation that I'm retiring the summer of 2022.

Three people in the last two weeks have asked why I am retiring so early. I discovered they all thought I was in my mid-50s. How generous of them – or foolish! I turn 67 next February so I will be well on my way to 68 by the time I finish up. Only two of Westminster's pastors were older than I am when they finished their ministry. One of them is Bob Young, Westminster's now 93-year-old Pastor Emeritus, a great colleague, an excellent mentor and a good friend – a dear man and a great pastor.

Bob planned to retire from Westminster at age 68, but because of the move to this location and capital campaigns that needed to be launched to pay for the building, Bob was talked to by some members of this congregation and he agreed to stay until age 70. The other pastor older than me when he finished his ministry at Westminster was Pastor Charles Williamson, who served from 1901 to 1935. **34 years.** The longest tenure of any pastor. Like Bob Young, Pastor Williamson also finished his ministry at Westminster at age 70. **Because he died.** I'm shooting for Bob Young's 93 – but I'm not taking any chances!

Pastors are often spoken of as having a flock. And their position with a congregation is as shepherd. Which is why I was glad to have this text for today – the two texts. The 23rd Psalm. The LORD is my shepherd. The LORD is your shepherd. The LORD is our shepherd. And the Gospel of John, where Jesus declares – HE is the GOOD SHEPHERD. One flock. One shepherd. He talks about other flocks but He will gather them all. One shepherd, one flock.

The hired hand – or the hireling – who is NOT the shepherd; does not own the sheep – just works for the GOOD SHEPHERD. He or she is NOT the shepherd, and when it gets too dangerous, the hired hand may run away!

Far from testifying for the “pastor as shepherd” model, this text from John makes it clear there can be only one shepherd of the flock – and that shepherd is Jesus Christ. He also makes clear what the qualification for the Good Shepherd is and it’s really straightforward. Being willing to lay down your life for the sheep.

Think about that. Laying down one’s life is purposeless unless one has rendered ineffective the marauders – the threats to the flock. Otherwise when the shepherd is dead, the sheep are even more vulnerable. The wolves – the power of evil – are intent on destroying the sheep. It is only Jesus’ death and resurrection that renders ineffective the power of evil and death. No pastor, however good a hired hand he or she may be, can come close to that. They can only point to Jesus. The very first word I preached when I came to Westminster – point to Jesus – we would see Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

Did you notice, **five times in our reading** we are told the good shepherd freely lays down his life for his sheep. Jesus clearly wants his followers to understand that He wasn’t caught by surprise and dragged off kicking and screaming. Jesus wants **US** to understand that even the antagonism of His enemies was somehow made to serve God’s purpose. While an observer may have judged Jesus’ execution to have been a shameful defeat, the Gospel writer and the early church understood it to be part and parcel of Jesus’ ministry and vocation. **Jesus is God’s faithful servant.** Good Shepherd.

While Jesus could have refused this terrible destiny; could have aborted the whole plan, taken flight and run away to escape the horror of the cross – while Jesus could’ve saved His life – He didn’t.

Instead, in that time, Jesus absorbed all the rage and hostility that has always been present in humanity. And instead of being annihilated by that human rage, Jesus embraced that terrible energy and transformed it into something else, turning the universe upside down. Where there should’ve been death, life sprang up.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. The one who willingly serves as God’s agent at the awesome intersection between life and death, between good and evil. And it’s because of that, brothers and sisters that You and I can offer our love and trust and obedience to **THIS ONE**.....

.....the One who promises to shepherd all of us through the threatening places; the One who promises to search each of us out when we’ve become lost; even if we are the very last one. The One who shields us from the terrible forces that would sink us into nothingness, the One who assures us of still waters and green pastures. Jesus, the One, true, Good Shepherd.

While I cast about for the role of a pastor with the flock, I ran across the commentator who suggested that instead of the shepherd, the pastor is like a sheepdog. A good sheepdog follows the shepherd’s guidance – responding to a symphony of whistles and commands, and works the flock according to the shepherd’s orders. The sheepdog’s

primary goal is to keep the sheep always moving toward the shepherd, eventually moving them into the safety of the shepherd's fold.

On occasion that may include a little bit of barking in the direction of the sheep – or maybe even nipping at the heels of a slow moving heart or a stubbornly wrong-headed idea in order to redirect attention toward the One who really has the sheep's best interest in mind – the GOOD SHEPHERD.

Sheepdog. I liked the idea. Then I made the mistake of researching the most capable sheepdog – the border collie. Here's what I learned: The Border Collie is a working dog breed, developed in the Anglo-Scottish border region, for herding livestock, especially sheep. The border collie is not only highly intelligent, but is known to be extremely energetic, acrobatic and athletic!

Yeah, I'm thinking. It's time to retire!

Pastors will indeed, come and go. But thanks be to God – **for all of us sheep** – the Good Shepherd remains.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.