

Tender Mercies:
 Reflections on Thirty-five Years as Pastor
 Psalm 25:1-6; Luke 15:3-7
 Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Aug. 18) 2024
 Kyle Childress

He was a shepherd and noght a mercenarie.

-Chaucer, *General Prologue, The Canterbury Tales*

The mind that comes to rest is tended

In ways that it cannot intend:

Is borne, preserved, and comprehended

By what it cannot comprehend.

-Wendell Berry, *Sabbath*, 1979

Jane and I moved here 35 years ago this month to begin our ministry with you. We had been married for one year before coming here and both of our girls were born here. I'll never forget just before Emily was born – with Dr. Bob – assisting – my camera jammed. Right there in the labor and delivery room, my camera jammed. In a near panic, I quickly stepped out into the waiting room to ask if anyone had a camera, and the waiting area was packed with Austin Heights folks and several cameras were thrust upon me. I grabbed the one that was closest, it belonged to Judy Mc., and that's what I used to photograph newborn Emily. When Callie was born, the waiting area was again packed with Austin Heights, with more than a few of you lining the hallway. When we came out, wheeling 20 minute-old Callie down to the room, you welcomed her saying such things as, "Hello, Callie." And "Welcome Callie." I remember she lifted her head and looked

around as if to say, “Well, hello Austin Heights. Hello world.”

To say that our lives have been intertwined over these past 35 years is an understatement, to say the least. We almost newlyweds and soon to be new parents, grew together with you. And over these years, as your pastor, it has been my great honor to be present at your births, and preside at your baby dedications, baptisms, weddings, and funerals. I have counseled you, visited you, listened to you, and listened to God among you and in Scripture in order to speak a word to you on Sunday mornings. Thank you and thanks be to God.

In Wendell Berry’s great novel, *Jayber Crow*, there is a passage in which Jayber says much of what I’ve come to believe about our lives together and what I think when I stand up here most every Sunday morning. *What I saw now was the community imperfect and irresolute but held together by the frayed and always fraying incomplete and yet ever holding bonds of the various sorts of affection. ... I knew that, in the midst of all the ignorance and error, this was a membership. ... And yet I saw them all as somehow perfected, beyond time, by one another’s love, compassion, and forgiveness, as it is said we may be perfected by grace* (p. 205).

To perhaps inject a little humor in this, I also remember a great line from Inspector Armand Gamache in Louise Penny’s Three Pines series of murder mystery novels. In the first novel, Gamache reflects on the village of Three Pines and Penny writes, “Looking around he realized how much he liked this place and these people. Too bad one of them was a murderer” (p. 204).

When Jesus tells us that a shepherd had a hundred sheep and one goes missing, I never thought it might be murder. After reading so many murder mysteries that happen in small towns and villages, often with a local priest or vicar involved in helping solve them, I guess I’m learning to expand my understanding

of the parable.

Joking aside, I return to this parable of the one lost sheep this morning, because it is so formative to this congregation's self-understanding and formative for my own. The shepherd's staff is our sign and over the years of our entire history, long before I came along, the good shepherd and sheep has been central to knowing whose we are, who we are, and whom we hope to become.

When we first moved here, I was determined to be a well-read pastor, and finally, able to start reading in full, all of those excerpts of reading assignments I rushed through in college and seminary. One of those was Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and in the General Prologue there is a fifty-line description of a local pastor that I discovered was as pertinent today as it was in the late 1300's. Chaucer says the Parson was a scholar, he was learned. With his shepherd's staff in hand, he visited every member of his flock. He was not domineering but was patient and sought to draw folk to heaven by gentleness. He did not use his position for something else – to push an agenda, to use it as a steppingstone. Chaucer said, "He was a shepherd and not a mercenary."

In John 10 Jesus says he is the Good Shepherd, who will lay down his life for his sheep. Verse 3 says of the Good Shepherd, "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out."

I've long wondered about that line: knowing your sheep by name. It implies that your flock, your congregation is small enough that you know everyone by name, and that you know their stories, their trials and tribulations, their flaws, and their gifts.

Indeed, in what is considered the first Baptist Confession of Faith, written in

1611 by English Baptist Thomas Helwys who was in exile in Amsterdam at the time: Article 16 says, no congregation should be larger than where everyone has “particular knowledge of one another, so that they may perform all the duties of love one towards another, both to soul and body.”

Notice Helwys says where everyone has particular knowledge of one another so they may appropriately love one another. For Chaucer and for Thomas Helwys, church is where we know one another and love one another and therefore we know when someone is hurting or struggling or missing.

Many of us have been around long enough to know that it is rare for one sheep to go missing. Most of the time, several sheep are missing at once and some sheep just keep getting lost over and over. In a good flock, it takes all the sheep to keep up with each other and help the shepherd tend the flock.

There is a passage in Wendell Berry, I consider as important for young pastors to read and know as much as Chaucer’s Parson. Berry describes a farmer buying a farm and how he dreams of what he’ll do here in putting in an orchard or dig a pond over there. Every time Berry says farm or land or place, I’ve learned a long time ago, to interject the words church or congregation.

Berry says that if the farmer is faithful and sticks with the farm, working well and paying attention – in other words “tending” to it – then you gradually understand your dreams and visions might be an imposition upon it and in turn, you listen and learn and allow the farm (or the congregation) to teach you what is really there and what is really needed. He says a properly humbled farmer (or shepherd or pastor) sees clearly and sees details (see “People, Land, and Community” in *The Art of the Commonplace*, p. 187).

A pastor tends to the details of a congregation. She or he knows when a sheep is missing, listens to what is going on in people's lives and notices the context of the congregation. Tending, asking questions, and listening to the responses is an essential in being a good pastor and being a good member of a congregation – listening to what's going on with one another and listening to what God is up to through one another.

I use the word “tending” on purpose. Part of Psalm 25 says, “Show me thy ways, O LORD; teach me thy paths. Lead me in thy truth and teach me: for thou art the God of my salvation; on thee do I wait all the day. Remember, O LORD, thy tender mercies and thy loving kindnesses; for they have been ever of old (Ps. 25:4-6).

The word “mercy” in Hebrew comes from the word for uterus (*rachmim*). Mercy is the motherly love of a woman caring for the child born of her own body. It is why the King James Authorized Version translated Psalm 25:6 not simply as “be mindful of your mercy” but “remember, O Lord, thy tender mercies.”

Tending, tender mercies, caring, listening, and learning. It is maternal. It's what a pastor does. It is what we all are to do.

In his book, *The Presence of the Past*, political theorist Sheldon Wolin, has a wonderful essay that talks about two ways of looking at politics that confronted one another during the ratification of the American Constitution. He calls the two ways “tending” and “intending.” For Wolin, a politics of “intending” is one in which a system of power seeks to ensure a future by bringing all governing authority under a single rational order. The word “intending” means to seek deliberately to bring about some desired effect or purpose. It means to stretch or

strain toward a future with an effort that requires power. In other words, intending means to be in charge so problems can be fixed. A politics of intention means to have the power and authority to get something done.

In contrast, a politics of “tending” is best identified with what we do when we look after another. Tending requires “active care of things close at hand.” We tend the sick, we tend children, we tend a garden, or we tend sheep. Tending has to do with closeness, relationship, nurture, and care. It is patient and slow and attentive (see Wolin, pp. 88-91).

I remember Bob Moses, the legendary Civil Rights organizer in Mississippi and Alabama in the early 1960’s, said, “That was how I learned to organize... I heard my way through the world. I listened. I just listened and listened.” The late congressman Rep. John Lewis remembered, “We were meeting people on their terms, not ours. Before we ever got around to talking, we just listened.”

That’s the politics of tending. And it is what we’re about: a discipleship of tending, of small achievements. Tender mercies: caring, nurturing, patiently paying attention, and working slow, doing a lot of listening, healing, reconciling, and forgiving.

Most of you will remember our own Buckley MacInerney, whom we buried in 2021. Buckley was a kind of “old hippy” who was brilliant and multi-talented. On a whim he went back to school at SFA in the late 60’s and got his master’s in physics. Dr. Jack Decker, who was chair of the Dept. of Physics, said that Buckley was the smartest student he ever taught.

Recently, Buckley’s younger brother, Charles, posted on Facebook a piece remembering Buckley. Charles wrote:

In 1976, my father purchased one hundred acres of mixed hardwoods in East Texas, located along Sand Hill Road. He hired bulldozers to construct a long driveway leading to the back of the property, where he built a spring-fed lake and began work on a barn overlooking it. Several months later, a storm dropped over twelve inches of rain, which followed the unpaved road down to the lake, picking up sand along the way and creating a white sandy beach. However, the next day, we discovered that the road had been washed away, leaving a four-foot-deep canyon in its place.

In response, my father poured concrete on the steepest part of the driveway. However, the next rain undermined the concrete, carving out a new path. He then brought in a bulldozer and backhoe, but once again, the road washed out. A few years later, I noticed that despite several substantial rains, the road no longer washed out. At the time, I didn't think much of it. One afternoon, I was talking to my older brother, Buckley, when a heavy rain began. He excused himself, saying he was going to take a walk in the rain. It was a warm summer rain, so I followed him to continue our conversation.

As we walked up the steep road through the woods, a fast-moving stream of water was already flowing from the open field at the top of the hill down to the lake. As we walked and talked, my brother occasionally picked up a handful of leaves and dropped them in the path of the water. After the third time he did this, I asked him what he was doing. "The leaves slow the water, and as it slows, some of the sand drops out and creates a sandbar. The sandbar shifts the direction of the water," he explained. As we continued to walk up the driveway, he pointed out the numerous sandbars that I had stepped over for years without noticing, and how each one diverted some of the water off the road and into the woods. "The trick is to see where the water wants to go, and then help it find the best path."

It turned out that he had been doing this for years. What my father couldn't achieve with bulldozers and concrete, my brother accomplished with a handful of leaves.

“Intending” uses bulldozers. “Tending” listens to the place, paying attention to where the water wants to go, and to what it is saying and responds accordingly. Good pastors and good congregations tend to one another and to the world around them, always listening to what God is saying.

I'll be honest. I'm convinced that if I were not the pastor for thirty-five years of this small church, I probably would not see this. I'm convinced that the reason I can read Chaucer and Wendell Berry and others and see the key importance of nurture and tender mercies, is because I see and read through you: a small, modest congregation. If I were a Big Steeple pastor, I would likely think the Way of God was Bulldozers and Big Answers, Big Productions, Big Events, and Big Money.

I believe this is how God works. It's called the Incarnation, God becoming the human Jesus and calling disciples like you and me to love and serve and heal and care. Big Answers and Big Actions imply we are not responsible. It means we can be bystanders and spectators. We don't have to be personally involved. But the Way of God in Jesus Christ, means that we are not only responsible, we are called. We are called to be involved. The Incarnation means God got involved, personally, relationally. And so are we.

So, remember the quote we've talked about many times before from Mother Teresa, “We can do no great things – only small things, with great love.” Each day we are tempted to despair at the enormity of the problems before us, try to do one small thing with great love.

I believe that in some mysterious way we don't understand, that when we tend to one small thing with great love, God works and empowers through that one small thing in ways beyond our comprehension.

There was a story that circulated at youth camp a few years ago of a little girl who got up each morning and made herself a sandwich for her school lunch. She put it in a plastic sandwich bag and got in the car and her mother drove her to school. They went the same route every morning. And every morning they came to a red light where over on the sidewalk there was an old, bedraggled, dirty, homeless man sitting. Every morning she looked out the car window at the man and every morning he looked at her.

One morning, almost on a whim, when she made her sandwich, she made a second sandwich and put it in a sandwich bag too. When her mother and her got to the intersection red light, she rolled her window down just a few inches, looked at the man, and stuck the sandwich out the window. Before the light could change the man got up, came to the window, and took the sandwich.

The next morning, she didn't fix a second sandwich and when she came to the red light she didn't roll down her window but she looked at the man and she could see that he looked sad. So the next day, she fixed a second sandwich and at the red light she again rolled her window down and again the man came and got the sandwich. She did the same the next day and the day after. One day she and her mother drove up to the red light and with the man, were a whole line of homeless people looking at her. Her mother said, "Now what are you going to do? We can't feed everyone."

At school and at home by social media, and by face-to-face conversation, she contacted every one of her friends who went to school the same route she went.

And every one of her friends fixed one extra sandwich. When each child got to the same red light, they gave one sandwich to a person in line. Over time, by way of word of mouth and social media, this little girl got other kids at other schools to do the same and it spread to other cities.

One little girl. One extra sandwich. One small thing with great love. One person at a time. One missing sheep. One small church named Austin Heights – tending and caring.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.