

A sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens on September 21, 2025 at North Congregational Church, Just North, Columbus, Ohio – where I served as pastor from March 12, 1989- January 9, 2000), dedicated to the 27 pastors who served this church through 150 years of faithful service as Pastor or Senior Pastor, to other pastors, ministers of music, organists, interim pastors, to all staff who served here in administration, care for this building and more, to all the babies, infants, children, teens and adults who grew in faith in this spiritual home, to all who were baptized here, confirmed here, and married here, received holy communion here, and to all who have come here in distress, felt shelter from the storms of life here and left filled with the Spirit of God and always to the glory of God!

“The Voice of the Sheepdog and the Smell of the Sheep”
Ezekiel 34:1-16, John 10:1-18

Before beginning, I would like to read the names of the 27 servants of God who faithfully served as the call pastors/senior pastors at North Congregational Church since 1875: Joseph Harris (founding pastor), John Jones, Irving Metcalf, George S. J. Brown, Erastus H. Scott, Homer Thrall, Porter Milligan, John J. Shingler, William Leon Dawson, A.J. Williamson, George T. Nichols, Wesley E. Bovey, Payson L. Curtis, Thomas D. Edwards, Kleber Edwin Hall, Francis A. LeCroix, David Bent, Benjamin H. Smallwood, Alan C. Herman, Thomas Mooney, J. Robert Sandman, George W. Bahner, James B. Santo, James G. Deitz, Timothy C. Ahrens, Eric Williams, and my pastor/our pastor – Stephen Van Kuiken. Thanks be to God for each one and their beloved pastoral service to North Church.

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Sheep, Shepherds and Sheep Dogs. I will talk about them all today.

Let's start with sheep. Have you ever thought about this: The church is the only place where referring to someone as a sheep is a potentially good thing. In scripture there are 114 references to sheep and shepherds. But, outside of scripture, being sheep – those wooly creatures who follow a person around the countryside - is really not something that's celebrated.

Dodge didn't name their trucks – The Dodge Lamb. There is no football team playing anywhere this weekend called the Sheep or the Lambs- although the phrase “the Lambs are Slaughtered Once Again” would be tempting for any sports journalist to post - for that matter, even “The Lambs Slaughtered the Bears” would also cause a double take.

Think how sheep are described – meek, stupid, unimaginative, easily led, docile, compliant, easily influenced (not words I associate with the flock of North Church). The word “Sheep” has even entered the Mash-up of words as 2017 Webster's Dictionary officially added, “sheeple” for “people” who act like “sheep” and take anything that people sell them or tell them as the truth – as fact. In the divisive times in which we live, Sheeple can be manipulated by any side to describe everyone one side deems as falling for whatever it is they can't stand.

Sheeple - They are everywhere – and joked and poked about by everyone.

Bottom line is – most of us would never seek out the title of “sheep” and certainly not Sheeple. But, here is the twist that scripture today feeds us – being called sheep is most influenced by who the shepherd is.

If you have a Good Shepherd (and we do!) and that Good Shepherd is Jesus, then it is okay to be a sheep.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus clearly says there is a huge difference between the hired hand and the Good Shepherd. The hired hand runs away when the wolves show up – but the Good Shepherd stays, protects and defends his own. He knows his sheep, and they know his voice. And he will lay down his life for them.

Ezekiel 34 takes this profound difference much further. The prophet digs deep into what makes a bad shepherd. The Bad Shepherd cares for himself and not the flock. He does not protect the weak among them – he doesn’t seem to care for any of them at all. A bad Shepherd takes off whenever he feels like it loses touch with the flock entirely.

In the words of the God of Israel, Ezekiel proclaims that God’s sheep will be cared for in fields with good grazing land, if lost God will find them, if injured God will be bind them up, none will be left behind. Like Father, like son. This Shepherd – from generation to generation is Good!

I love the Good Shepherd in Ezekiel and John. I will declare myself a sheep in His fold. I trust in Him to protect and deliver me and mine. Staying close our

Good Shepherd, we will not stray and meander all too far. This is where my view differs from most pastors. We pastors are often referred to a Shepherd of the flock. Translated here in the 150 year history of North Congregational Church – Just North – we name and claim 27 Good Shepherds. But I believe this is not honest – theologically, biblically, or even practically.

While I believe and celebrate that Pastor Steve is my pastor, I don't believe Steve is my Good Shepherd – that title I reserve for the one and only Jesus of Nazareth, my crucified and Risen Savior. **Pastor Steve is my Sheep Dog.** Now I know Pastor Steve appears very long and lean for a Sheep Dog – but he is, nonetheless, a Sheep Dog. I joyfully declare today, he is the 27th Sheep Dog in the long line of North Church Sheep Dogs.

I served as a Sheep Dog for 40 years, almost 11 them here - so I know my breed when I see my breed. Let me explain...

We sheepdogs, particularly the Old English Sheepdogs (clearly direct descendant from the first English Separatists or Pilgrims) are known for our good natures, and playful temperament. We are known to be gentle, protective, fiercely committed to fairness and justice for all. We also make excellent family companions. We will gather our flock together at the command of the Good Shepherd and seek to hold them together. We are protective of our own. We have been known to suffer from separation anxiety – if left alone too long. We also have

a sponge-like quality about us. We soak up knowledge at an impressive rate and thus translate all that we learn into care and compassion for the flock. Overall, we are quick-witted, patient, affectionate, and make great companions for families and individuals alike.

We are devoted, intensely loyal and we will guide the sheep through treacherous terrains – including death of loved ones, loss of meaning in your life, traumas and tragedies, pandemics, wars, and rumors of wars, divisions within the congregation, the country and more. We do this – always by the side of the Good Shepherd – with our ears tuned to His voice – prepared to respond to His commands. Our voices are heard by the people (sheeple? Sheep) we serve as we echo the Good Shepherd's call to follow Him.

One more thing, we are also very well known for our herding instincts. On behalf of my breed, I apologize for the times I nipped at your heels rather than use my voice and body motions to get you moving forward and headed in the direction to which the Good Shepherd was calling all of us. But, it is in my nature (our nature) to nip once in a while.

As I have mentioned, we have had 27 called pastors in the 150 years of North Church's history. There were 24 in the first 100 years and three in the last fifty years. Jim Deitz (1973-1987) was serving when the 100th Anniversary happened and crossed over into the next fifty years. As the 24th pastor, he was the

longest serving until Eric Williams came and lovingly and faithfully served for 18 years – far outdistancing the service of all the rest of us. Thanks be to God for Eric! And now I would like to add – thanks be to God for the dynamic and prophetic ministry of Pastor Steve, too!

But, I want to lift up pastors from our history noted by the church historian of 1956, Mrs. Kenneth Gruber. At the time the congregation relocated from East and Blake Streets in the north end of Columbus (north of OSU), she named with special reverence (no pun intended) Joseph Harris the founding pastor who appealed to First Congregational Church and several other congregational churches in Columbus to support their founding efforts after striking out with the Methodists, J. Porter Milligan (1889-1897) who tripled the size the congregation, his successor John J. Shingler (1897-1900), and Pastor K.E. Wall (1924-1935) were also noted for their outstanding service to North Church.

Just as the church was preparing to move from the corner of East and Blake (now the Central Vineyard Church) to the faraway land of Henderson Road 5.7 miles north and west in 1957, Mrs. Gruber went on to say, “It is for us, the members of North Congregational Church, to be dedicated to the work that they thus far, so nobly carried on...For over 75 years this church has stood for the Kingdom of Christ....How bright and clear shine the rays of light shed by those

early pioneers of old North Congregational Church! Thank God for their good work.” Amen? Amen!

The Good Shepherd and his loyal assistants, we 27 Sheep Dogs have attended the thousands of “Sheep” here in Columbus that have called fields of North Church home for a long time. Hearing the sounds of His voice and the hearing the Sheep Dogs varied intonations of barks and cries, the faithful have moved forward as tremendous witnesses for the Kingdom of Christ.

There is something else about these Sheep Dogs that I want to lift up. I believe their closeness to Christ and their closeness and faithfulness to the flock on this high ground of Henderson Road has placed them so close to the flock that they *smell like the sheep* they care for.

I take this image from Pope Francis, of blessed memory. Shortly after being named as Pope in 2013, Pope Francis said, for the first of many times while speaking to priests in Rome, *“This I ask you: be shepherds, with the “odor of the sheep”, make it real, as shepherds among your flock.”*

The Sheep Dogs need “to smell like” the flock they care for. We need to be so close to the flock that we become one with them in this closeness. For myself, I remember late nights in hospital rooms, all night vigils with members in their homes with loved ones who were dying (which brings to mind the vigil with Rose Schultz on her last night of life as she stayed alive for the break of dawn so she

could live to see another Spring – as so it was the dawn brought the first day of spring), and tears shed for those who were hurting or lost. Not until the Sheep Dogs smell like the sheep, will their ministry mean much at all. I know that Pastor Steve smells like the flock. He abides with you in a transparent and gentle way. Thank you Pastor Steve.

But, I need to add it is all of our jobs to come close and stay close to all of the flock who are the least, the lost, the forsaken, the forgotten – the smelliest of all the sheep.

There is a wonderful story I heard from years past, told to me by The Rev. Dr. William Sloan Coffin. During the days of the Vietnam War, a young pastor could not help but speak out against the war. It angered the church leaders so much that a secret meeting was called to decide what to do. All but one member of the Church Council was present. He was the leader of the John Birch Society in Chicago and was out of town so he couldn't make the meeting, but it was assumed he would support their motion to fire the pastor. When the special congregational meeting was called, the Council president announced their unanimous decision to fire their pastor. The man believed to be the most conservative member of the congregation stood up and spoke. He said, "that's a lie. This decision is not unanimous. I was not at the meeting. Furthermore, I would NEVER vote to fire this pastor. When my wife was dying of cancer, he was there every day by her side

more months. I have never known a more loyal, loving and compassionate pastor. If we fire him, we will all have to deal with God's wrath upon us. I vote 'no' to this stupid motion." The pastor – who smelled like the sheep – was retained and stayed for many more years with the love of the people reflecting all the love he had shared with them.

When the invitation to preach today was extended by Pastor Steve and backed up by JoAnne Nay and the committee working on the 150th celebration, I was asked to speak on Justice. This was to be Justice day for your 150 years celebration – having followed Rev. Williams' wonderful sermon in July on the actual 150th Anniversary Sunday. Because my life and ministry has been committed to the work of social justice and because, as a founding pastor of BREAD, while serving as your pastor, that made sense. It made sense because I was your pastor when this congregation boldly decided and pioneered the witness to become to the first Open and Affirming Congregation of the UCC in Ohio south of the greater Cleveland Area – almost 30 years ago.

It made sense because of the work we did together to house homeless families back in the 90's and the classes we had and the ministry we had with Adults with Developmental Disabilities. It made sense because of our stands for racial justice and the marches we were apart of during my time as your Sheep Dog. But, for me, all justice always grows out of relationships.

The work of justice – that relational work – comes down to figuring out what was taken from whom and returning it to them. In this regard, each of us should be doing justice every day in all sorts of ways. If someone's dignity has been stripped, we return to them. If someone's trust has been broken, we must work to rebuild it and return it to them. If someone is physically or emotionally abused, we must work to rectify that and return hope and healing. If someone is beaten down by racial and economic injustice, we must work for reparation and restoration and return equality and equity to them. If someone is driven from their home, their land, their identity and their heritage, we work to get that back to them. As Abolitionist Theodore Parker proclaimed and Dr. King repeated over and over, “the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” So, we must keep hanging on the arc and bending it towards justice.

Justice begins and ends in relationships. I guarantee you that if there is no relationship, there can be no justice.

So, never tire in your work for Justice Just North. In a few weeks, I will stand with my other new member classmates and rejoin North Church as one of the sheep (never a Sheeple) - no longer the Sheep Dog of yesteryear. I hope I can bring a little of my herding instinct to you and assist in any way possible in assisting our work for justice.

We as sheep under the able nudging and nipping of our Sheep Dog, will follow the Good Shepherd. With my hearing aids in, I will be listening to the voice of our Sheep Dog, Pastor Steve as he guides our feet to follow Jesus, our Good Shepherd. I ask you to hold in your hearts the 26 Sheep Dogs/Pastors who have gone before Pastor Steve. Remember that they gave themselves to this church so that North Church could be a star of shining light – true North, Due North is where they sought to lead you. And keep your eyes of this prize and never give up or weaken in doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with your God. Amen.