

Who is Jesus? Series

**“I am the Good Shepherd”***(Biblical Text: John 10:11-16)**Dr. Michael F. Gardner, Senior Pastor - Old Mission Church, Fairway, Kansas*

Today is Graduation Sunday. In High Schools, and Colleges, in cards and gifts, *and on Facebook*, students are ending one journey and beginning another one. **Graduations are good but rarely easy.**

I know this from personal experience. When I received my BA from Baker it was my fourth college. When I finally earned my doctorate, I'd been in school, off and on, for thirty years. **Graduations are good but rarely easy.**

At every graduation, I received advice from people I hardly knew. Like when I was seventeen, and my uncle said, *“Enjoy this – these are the best years of your life.”* The thing is - they weren't. **Graduations are good, but rarely easy.**

Ten years ago, our son and daughter-in law graduated from Kansas State University, different colleges. We went to both ceremonies. And I listened to the advice from all the speakers - six in one afternoon. **Have mercy!**

I'd like to tell you that they all were inspiring, well delivered, wise, and life changing. But, that simply would be untrue. Before each speech, I found myself praying, *“Lord, I hope that this one says something of value!”* By the time the last one rolled around, I prayed, *“Lord, just make it interesting enough that I don't fall asleep.”* **Sort of like Sunday mornings!**

So, let me get right to it, while you still might be listening. In John 10:10, Jesus said, *“I have come that you may have life and live it abundantly.”*<sup>1</sup> The question is, *“How do we do that?”* To answer, we've been looking at Jesus' **“I am”** sayings in John. This week, the verse is John 10:11, where Jesus says, *“I am the good shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep.”*<sup>2</sup>

Jesus earned his place in history. He laid down his life. And he gave it for us. It doesn't matter how you interpret his atonement. *Actually it does* - but all the interpretations, all of them, agree on this. **His life mattered!**

And whatever “church name” appears on the sign or over the door, millions of lives have been changed by following his one exemplary life. Jesus said in John 10:14: *“I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me.”*<sup>3</sup>

1 John 10:10, paraphrased by the author.

2 John 10:11. *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, Copyright © 1989. Used by permission.

3 Ibid. John 10:14. *New Revised Standard Version Bible*.

**And we never graduate from knowing him and following him.**

Don't get me wrong. I hope this year's high school graduates go on to achieve much, earn college and degrees, and have a fruitful life. I hope they are willing to dream, and seek to fulfill their dreams.

One of the pieces of advice I remember from my own high school graduation were the words of my mother who said, *"Michael, you can be anything you want to be, if you are willing to work for your dreams."*

Dreams are important. So is hard work. So are degrees. But even a doctoral degree doesn't ensure your life will mean something. It takes more than that. Titles and degrees are only tools to be used for the glory of God.

We are called to walk in faith, and in deeper steps of faithfulness we are called to live the abundant life Jesus promised. The question is, "Are we?"

Teilhard de Chardin, in The Divine Milieu said: *"Without faith, the waves engulf us, the winds blow, nourishment fails, sickness lays us low... If, on the other hand, we believe, the waters are welcoming and sweet, bread is multiplied, our eyes open, and the power of God raises us to life again."*<sup>4</sup>

For those with faith, whether we have many degrees or none, each day is a new beginning, and every day is graduation day to what lies ahead.

The first sermon I ever preached in my life was on Youth Sunday when I was a Senior, now forty-four years ago. I told them everything I knew about Jesus. It took about five minutes! I preach longer now. **Have mercy.**

I know more about following Jesus now. I know more about navigating disappointments and false starts, and seeking to fulfill God's dream for me. And I learned most of it long after graduation day.

**And one of the things I learned was this.**

Tony Campolo once told the story of a graduation Sunday in his home Church, an African American congregation in inner city Philadelphia.

He said that one by one, the students came to the pulpit and they told the congregation what they were doing, where they were going to college, the things they were going to do that their parents couldn't even have dreamed.

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<sup>4</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, The Divine Milieu. Copyright © 2004, Sussex Academic Press.

When they were all seated, Tony says that his aged pastor looked down at them and began his graduation message this way:

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*“Children, you are gonna die.” “They are gonna take you off to the cemetery, drop you in a hole, throw dirt in your face, and go back to the church and eat potato salad.” “Then, what good will all your titles be?”*

Tony said that his pastor did next what only a African-American preacher can do; he swept through the Bible in five minutes. He says it was incredible.

*“In Exodus: Pharaoh had the title, but God parted the sea and delivered the people! Pharaoh still had his title, but **Moses had a testimony!**”*

*“Queen Jezebel was going to kill Elijah on Mount Carmel - but when it was over and the dust was settled, she had her title; but **Elijah had a testimony!**”*

*“King Darius threw Daniel into the lion’s den; but when it was over, all Darius had was a title, **Daniel had a testimony!**”*

*“My Lord Jesus, the Chief Priest rejected him, Pontius Pilate put him on the Cross - they had their titles. But when God rolled the stone away, and Jesus was raised - **the Church had itself a testimony!**”*

*“At the end of the book, John was exiled upon a rock. But he caught a vision of what only God can do: “The Kingdom of our God and of his Christ will reign forever and ever!” Caesar kept his title, **but God had a testimony!**”*

*“Children, one of these days they are going to drop you in a hole, throw dirt in your face, and go back to the church and eat potato salad.”*

*“I hope you earn your titles. I do. But the question is, what will it all mean?”*

*“They’ll put a tombstone on your grave one day. And people will stop by to remember what kind of man or woman you were. How you lived.”*

*“Oh children. **Don’t settle for only a title, when you can have a testimony.**”<sup>5</sup>*

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**Don’t settle for only a title. When you can have a testimony. Amen.**

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<sup>5</sup> Story adapted from one told by Tony Campolo in the sermon, “Doing Greater Things,” preached at St. Luke’s United Methodist Church in Houston, TX, August 20, 2006.