

## **Politicians Leave Poor to be Devoured by Economic 'Wolves'**

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It pains me to say it, but it appears that Jesus is anti-laborer.

Not "anti-labor," mind you, since, as far as I can tell, the New Testament is silent on the rights of workers to organize. But, according to the Gospel of John (10: 11-13), Jesus despises and condemns the hired help.

This comes in a section of that Gospel having to do with shepherding. According to the gospel-writer, Jesus says he is the "good" or "noble" or "model" shepherd. And what makes him a good or noble or a model shepherd? Because, Jesus says, "I'm willing to die for the sheep."

That's in contrast to the "hired hands" who don't own the sheep and, when they see a wolf or a wolf pack coming, don't stick around to protect the lives of the sheep but flee. The laborers, who don't have any interest and investment in the sheep but only in themselves, run away.

So the wolves come and the untended sheep scatter. Some are snatched and maimed for life; some are killed.

The good or noble or model shepherd wouldn't let that happen, according to Jesus. In fact, the exemplary shepherd will put her or his life on the line so the sheep aren't scattered or hurt and don't lose their lives.

(It's probably important to note here that Jesus is, at least implicitly, critical of some shepherds who, while invested in the sheep, aren't willing to risk their own lives for the well-being of the flock they tend. That, after all, is what distinguishes the good or noble or model shepherd from the others: the willingness to sacrifice oneself for the good and safety of the sheep.)

A little later in this passage (John 10:16-17) Jesus also makes it clear that he has more than one fold of sheep and that he is invested in all of the sheep that are his. Evidently, no one fold of sheep is favored over the others. He leads them all. He knows them all. He is willing to die for them all.

All of this is in contrast to the hired hands who flee whenever they see danger approaching.

The wolves are coming. The wolves are already here. And more wolves are likely on the way. The worldwide economic crisis threatens the sheep everywhere.

The question, then, is whether we have hired hands or shepherds, especially shepherds who follow the model of the good shepherd, looking after the flocks. Yes, the plural applies: our flocks.

In my own state of Illinois the response to that question is not encouraging.

Like most states, there's a big hole in the budget here – an \$11 billion hole. After years of deliberate neglect – of governors and legislators refusing to face up to the fact that the state has a structural deficit that is putting the state in more peril each year – we finally have a governor who has actually proposed an increase in the income tax.

The truth is that even the new governor's proposal isn't enough to take care of the sheep, all of the sheep in the many sheepfolds. That is, his proposal closes the \$11 billion deficit but does next to nothing to provide the funding necessary to meet the growing number of people who are suffering or the stark inequalities that have been allowed to widen over the past decades.

But as inadequate as the governor's proposal is, his potential rivals for the governorship are shamelessly suggesting that no tax increase is necessary, that no tax reforms are necessary, that no fundamental reordering of priorities in order to protect all the sheep in all of the sheepfolds is necessary. With only a few exceptions, that's the position of most of the state's legislators and most of the editorial boards of the state's media.

They are fleeing. They are fleeing for their political life. In Jesus' terms, they are hired hands, these political leaders and opinion shapers.

Our state has the opportunity, for example, to help protect the lambs – to create a tax structure that would provide equal educational funding for all the children in Illinois and thereby give them an equal shot at making good on their God-given talents.

That's what good shepherds would do for those lambs in the face of the wolves that have been circling around some sheepfolds for a good long time and are now ready to attack.

But we're stuck with hired hands, who, just as expected, are fleeing the sheep and the lambs. Of course, other states have their share of hired hands, too.

However, maybe it isn't just the politicians and opinion makers. In a democracy, where supposedly "the people" rule, it would be "we the people" who should be the shepherds. And for those of us who are followers of the good, the noble, the model shepherd, are we, just like the hired hands, fleeing?