

Fight or Flight – John 10:11-18

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To applaud or show one's appreciation is the definition of one of our popular slang phrases, "Give it up."

"Give it up for one of America's best loved entertainers" you often hear as somebody is being introduced. And the crowd goes wild. Or, "Give it up for one of the best Dad Joke tellers there is, the Rev. Matthew R. Nieman!" Speaking of which, a girlfriend broke up with her boyfriend after she discovered he only had nine toes. Evidently she was lack toes intolerant.

We really should be saying, "Give it up for somebody who has brokered peace in the Middle East" (could we please find somebody to do this!). Or, "Give it up for teachers who sacrificially dedicate themselves for the good of their students."

Today, we are giving it up for those who give themselves up for others, those who fight rather than flee when danger approaches. On Easter Sunday, I mentioned all the first responders who run toward danger while the rest of us run away from it. They are the epitome of those who "give it up" for others.

Our model of one who gives his or her life up for another, of course, is the good shepherd. Jesus described himself with that term. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." He is the one who does not flee when the wolf comes. He is not like the hired hand who gets scared when things get tough and takes off, only to let the sheep be scattered.

No, this shepherd is the good shepherd, the one who fights, the one who will be going nowhere when things get tough. He is the one who is constantly enduring with his sheep, walking through the darkest valleys, guiding them when it might be easier to let them face their future on their own.

When we read this account of a shepherd intimately caring for his sheep, we can't miss the huge flashing sign we all should be

seeing. And the message that sign carries is that the Good Shepherd is all about having relationships with his sheep.

Jesus wants relationship with us—so much so that he’s willing to die for our well-being.

In the last four years, the Church in America has undergone great change. Since the pandemic, churches have been reduced. Things have been stripped away from churches—like members, offerings, and programs. Now, as a pastor, I lament, to a certain extent, the loss of all three of those. I’m a big fan of full membership churches, full offering plates, and a full calendar of programs to meet the needs of everybody.

But what has remained as the glue that has kept churches together has been the relationships, the connections people have with each other. Because, in the end, that’s what we all crave—connection. And that connection starts with the one who wants to have a connection with us—the Good Shepherd. Jesus values his relationship with us so much that he lays himself down for us in the face of threats all around us. He fights rather than flees.

In turn, we have connection with each other. And we yearn to foster greater connection with each other and with those who are looking to break free of their loneliness and isolation. You’re gonna hear in a few minutes about what’s happening at UKirk, the Presbyterian campus ministry at the UT. And the opportunity we have to help make connections and relationships among young people of faith stronger through UKirk.

Some of you have no doubt visited the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican in Rome. And the rest of us have at least seen pictures of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and Michelangelo’s famous depiction of Adam — stretched out on the ground, dazed and confused, one arm, one hand, reaching out toward an old and slightly wild looking God, who’s also stretching out an arm, a hand, with one finger almost touching Adam’s. In between is a teeny space separating God from humanity. Separating us from God.

And while we all struggle to fill that tiny space, that gap, between God and ourselves, Jesus is the one who can fill it. Jesus bridges that gap, so tiny in the painting, so vast in our lives. What we need to do is climb up on that bridge, walk across it and touch the outstretched hand of God.

That's part of our response to his willingness to lay himself down for our sake.

For those of us who are his sheep, what else should our response be to this amazing gesture of him laying himself down for us? How do we react when the good shepherd stands with us amid the fear, loneliness, and difficult stretches of our journeys? It seems as though there are three natural responses: Gladly accept the guidance and renewal the good shepherd offers, offer thanks for the shepherd's generosity, and, finally, be good shepherds ourselves.

How many of you have ever had difficulty accepting a gift? Maybe because we live in a society that so much values rugged individualism and self-reliance, it becomes hard to accept someone's generosity without any obligation for something in return.

On a radio call-in show one day, the caller to the show explained that she and her husband had recently been through a very tough time economically. It was hard making ends meet. And she had been praying that God would show them a way out of the deepening financial hole in which they found themselves. Evidently, some good friends of this caller's parents had found out about the young couple's problems. And in an attempt to help, the friends sent this couple a check for \$500, saying they wanted to help and wished them good luck.

The caller was full of anguish. "What should I do?" the caller asked the host. "We don't want to be a burden to these people, we want to handle things ourselves, and we're praying that God will show us a way out of this. What should we do with this money?"

And the radio host told her the most logical and best way to handle it. "Accept the gift. You've been praying that God will lead you out of this mess, so here's a solution. Accept the money. Bake

this couple some cookies and thank them for their generosity. Don't expect this to happen all the time, but accept it nonetheless."

In our attempts to not burden people with our problems, we often fail to accept the generosity that others offer. It's the same way in the church. Six days a week, we live lives that are often unworthy of praise and respect. And on the seventh day we come to church mindful of our guilt and unwilling to let the gift of forgiveness God offers correct everything about those first six days.

The good shepherd laid his life down for us. The only thing worse than the sinful lives we lead is not accepting Jesus' gift of sacrifice that makes our lives clean.

Accept the good shepherd's gift.

And then secondly, say thank you. Take that plate of cookies over to those friends who wrote that check out for you and tell them how much you appreciated their generosity. Write that thank-you note to the teacher who got you through a tough course in school. Tell a veteran of our armed forces that you appreciate what he or she did to help guarantee your freedom and security. Find some way to express how grateful you are to somebody who cared for you enough to make you the person you are today.

When we gather in this place each Sunday and all the times in between, we should do so first and foremost out of appreciation for what God has done. When we sing our hymns together, we raise our voices in thanksgiving. When we hear the words stating how it is that God has forgiven us, we should listen in appreciation. When we stand together and say what it is that we believe, we should speak in gratitude for the gift the good shepherd gave in laying down his life for us.

Accept the good shepherd's gift, and say thank you. And then finally, be good shepherds ourselves.

Inspiration for being good shepherds is found in numerous places, no more so than when we remember a servant who has died. It's in those occasions where we have the opportunity to take the lessons from the deceased and incorporate them into our living.

This week, we will remember two such shepherds. On Friday at 2:00 here in the sanctuary we will remember and give thanks to God for Diane Lovin, who died back in December.

Diane was a youth group sponsor and Sunday School teacher at different points in her life, and, primarily, a loving mother and grandmother. A good shepherd.

And then this coming Saturday at 2:00 at Edgewood Cemetery, we will gather to remember and give thanks for May Slawson, whom many of you knew and loved. She died on Hilton Head Island a few months ago.

May and her husband, Tom, were charter members of this church. May was an elementary school teacher for many years here in Farragut, and a leader in this congregation—having served as an elder as recently as a decade ago. A good shepherd.

In these servants and so many others, we find our inspiration and know-how to shepherd others, to fight for rather than to flee. In their spirit, we teach one another, we give of our time, talent, and treasure, and care for one another in thanksgiving to God for the loving sacrifice he gave to us.

Accept the gift of the good shepherd, say thank you, and be good shepherds yourselves.

We can hear this theme of intimacy and devotion when Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd. “I know my own and my own know me,” he says.

Such intimacy has its price: “The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep” (10:11). Live everyday in the glory of that gift.