

“I LAY DOWN MY LIFE, AND I TAKE IT UP.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Text: John 10:10-18

Introduction.

Our son Zach works at Farmers Equipment and one of his jobs is cleaning up rental equipment when it is returned. He experiences first-hand how predictable human nature is. It's human nature to treat what we own better than what we don't own.

It is human nature to be rougher with a rental car than our own car. I take better care of my own skis than I do rental skis. Ask any rental property owner how renters treat their rent house. It's different from how an owner treats his house. It is human nature to be freer to spend someone else's money than our own money.

I'm not saying any of this is right, in fact it's not right, but you will agree with me that this is human nature. My dad taught me to leave things better than I found it and to return things better than I got it. But I had to be taught and trained, it's isn't human nature.

Knowing human nature very well Jesus paints a picture of sheep and shepherds and of the difference between how a hireling and a shepherd treat the sheep.

Hirelings.

Hirelings work for hire, they care more about being paid than they do about the sheep and they certainly won't make any sacrifice or take any risk for the sheep. His heart isn't in it. If a wolf comes, he's out of there, it's human nature. He does what he does out of love for money and self, not out of love for the sheep.

Hirelings work based on bad principles, they put themselves first. And their bad principles lead to bad practices, they will desert their duty if it serves their best interest. Even to the point of fatal consequences, illustrated by the selfishly motivated actions of that Germanwings co-pilot a couple of weeks ago.

Good Shepherd.

Three times Jesus contrasts Himself to the hired hand calling Himself the good shepherd.

He is a good shepherd because He knows all His sheep by name. In fact He knows their families, their history and heritage, their circumstances, their trials and temptations and secrets.

He bears patiently their many weaknesses and infirmities, their many wanderings and folly. There is nothing He doesn't know. And of His own sheep He doesn't despise any of them.

He is a good shepherd because He cares for His sheep. He knows exactly what each one needs from day to day. He leads them by the right path and guards and protects them from countless enemies. In fact He cares and provides and protects so well that He will not lose a single one.

He is a good shepherd for another reason, in fact the most important reason of all. Four times He defines the chief characteristic of a good shepherd as one who lays down his life for his sheep.

He is a good shepherd because when nothing else can be done to save His sheep from Satan and hell, He willingly gives His own blood, His own life.

A hired hand cares more about his own life than about the life of his sheep. But Jesus the owner cares more about the life of His sheep than His own life. He would rather lose His own blood than lose one of His sheep.

Do you have any clue how loved you are? Do you have any idea how much you have been loved? Have you considered the unfathomable disparity between what we deserve and what we have received all because of His great love?

Maybe you could find someone who might die for a good person, but who would die for an ungodly person. We who were children of wrath are now called children of God because of His great love for us in Jesus. Scripture speaks of this great love again and again.

Romans 5:8 God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Ephesians 2:4-5 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.

John 15:13 Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

I John 3:1 (KJV) Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God.

Behold. Skim over other passages of Scripture if you wish, but pause here. Behold, ponder, reflect, consider intently the depth of meaning here. Behold what kind of love the Father has loved us with that He should call us His children. Not servants, not subjects, but sons of God.

Three wolves

We see His love for us when we see what He does with the fierce wolves that threaten us. What are the wolves that are the greatest threat to the flock of God? Sin, death and judgment. These are the thieves that come to steal and kill and destroy the flock.

But Jesus interposes Himself between them and us.

Concerning the *wolf of sin*:

John 1:29 says of Jesus, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” Jesus nails our debt of sin to the cross, killing that wolf with His own body.

Concerning the *wolf of death*, Paul writes:

I Corinthians 15:55-57 “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”
56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Again on the cross Jesus brings about the death of death, death is a defeated foe who can no longer threaten His sheep.

Concerning the *wolf of judgment*:

John 3:17-18 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned

John 5:24 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

Romans 8:1-2 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

When these wolves showed up Jesus didn't flee, but actually drew them away from the flock to Himself and gave His own life to kill them.

Dead shepherd vs. Live shepherd.

The very best shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep is at that point a dead shepherd. That is the end of him. Can you imagine if the life of Jesus ended here, dying for His sheep but now leaving them shepherdless?

When Jesus was killed they buried him in a stone tomb and rolled a huge stone in front of it. Then the Pharisees came to Pilate asked permission to seal the tomb and put some guards at the entrance. They believed in belt and suspenders.

Matthew 27:65-66 Pilate said to them, “You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.” 66 So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

If Jesus laid down His life for His sheep and died, but stayed dead then death wins. But Jesus is different from all other shepherds.

John 10:17-18 I lay down my life that I may take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.

Jesus was not crucified because of the betrayal of Judas or the hatred of the Jewish leaders or the spineless injustice of Pilate or the harsh treatment of the Roman soldiers. This was not the death of a martyr overpowered by His persecutors.

“Remember that Jesus was a man who had spent His entire ministry, over the course of three years, as one who was always in complete control. He was the master of every situation. If a crowd wanted to throw Him off a cliff, He walked through them. If He was asleep in the bottom of a boat, and a tempest arose, He would tell the wind and waves what to do. . . . If He needed to walk across the Sea of Galilee, He would do so. . . . If He met a disreputable woman, He knew exactly what to say and do. He could tell people to roll away a stone so that a man who had been dead four days could obey Him and come out. In short, His disciples had never seen Him in over His head. The world had never seen such mastery. Never” (Doug Wilson, Good Friday homily).

Jesus let Himself be arrested and unjustly tried and tortured and crucified. He broke out of the tomb because He wasn't forced into the tomb in the first place. No one could keep Him down because no one ever knocked Him down, He laid down His own life when He was ready to.

The reason the gates of hell cannot prevail against the Church is because the gates of hell could not prevail against the Head of the Church, the Shepherd of the great flock of God.

Wherever the world tries to silence the church or silence the Gospel or silence Christians, know that Jesus works just as powerfully in the dark as in the light.

What's going on in *Indiana* is just the world shooting its best shot to silence Christians and the truth of the Gospel. It's what the world has always been doing and what the world will keep doing. But, friends, remember the world can't bury Jesus, the world can't kill Jesus, the world can't silence Jesus, the world can't hold Jesus down.

Acts 2:24 God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

He was not conquered by death, He conquered death. Jesus declawed the devil and defanged the wolf of death. The cause of Jesus' death wasn't evil forces, the cause of His death was love for His sheep.

Matthew 26:53-54 Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? 54 But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled?

Jesus did exactly as He intended to and in exactly the way He intended. He came to earth to pay the wages of all our sin, to satisfy the just wrath of God, and to redeem our souls from hell. For the joy that was set before Him He endured the cross and laid down His life for us.

We see here the power of Jesus, He is in full control of when and how He lays down His life and when and how He takes it back up.

Application and Conclusion.

There is an old story about Cyrus, the founder of the Persian Empire. A captured prince and his family were brought before him and he asked the prisoner, "What will you give me if I release you?" "The half of my wealth," was his reply. "And if I release your children?" "Everything I possess." "And if I release your wife?" "Your Majesty, I will give myself." Cyrus was so moved by his devotion that he freed them all. As they returned home, the prince said to his wife, "Wasn't Cyrus a handsome man!" With a look of deep love for her husband, she said to him, "I didn't notice. I could only keep my eyes on you--the one who was willing to give himself for me." (Unknown)

On this Resurrection Sunday should we not fix our eyes on the only person in the world who not only was willing to lay down His life for us but in fact did lay down His life for us?

Brothers and sisters, this is the best news of all. But it will do none of us any good if we don't listen to His voice and follow Him. Love the one who loved you so much to give His life for you. Don't love your life and your way, love His life and His way. Don't follow after the hirelings of this world, the false friends and false pleasures, they will leave you and abandon you in a heartbeat.

Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, laid down His life and died for us. Ponder the price He paid. Measure the price, measure the sacrifice, measure the intensity of the commitment, measure the love. Measure what has been done for you and let that become the measure of your love for Him and of your joy in Him and of your desire to live for Him and serve Him. He came that we might have life and that we might have life more abundantly.

And do not be afraid of what the world or Satan does. Jesus has overcome the world and the flesh and the devil. Jesus has destroyed sin and death. Jesus has the power of an indestructible life (Hebrews 7:16). And He who is in us is greater than He who is in the world.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Prayer:

Holy Father, Father of all glory, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we give to you all the praise and worship that is due your name for you have done a great and mighty thing. You have destroyed the last enemy death, you have defeated Satan, you have vanquished hell, you have raised to life your Son whom you crucified.

Enable us, to live and to love in the light and truth and promise of the resurrection. Reorder and reorient our lives around this one center, around this one central truth, the reality of Jesus' final and decisive triumph over death. Make this reality real and practical in all our daily lives, in all our daily interactions and relationships, to the glory of Jesus Christ, in whose mighty name we pray, Amen.