



*Grace Along the Appalachian Trail*  
*John 10:11-18*

Sunday, April 22nd, 2018 ~ 4th Sunday of Easter  
First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois  
The Rev. Dr. Forrest Krummel, Jr.

Since 1980 I have been part of a weekly clergy study group that explores and shares ideas about sermon texts. Since pastor Zach has been on our staff we've included something called lectio divina. This is a form of prayer study in which one person reads the text aloud, and we reflect upon what jumps out to us. This passage in John's gospel has always been a favorite of mine because of a particular verse, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold...and they will listen to my voice". (v. 16) But this last week, another verse or phrase also jumped out at me. "I lay (my life) down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again." (v. 18) I am going to share with you the insights that came to me as I studied this passage.

First, would you join me in prayer? Lord God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you. May everything said that is true be engraved on every heart and anything said that is false be quickly forgotten and cause no harm. Amen.

**I have other sheep not of this fold.** Jesus was speaking to his disciples, to those he called and those who seriously followed him. In this text he told them that there are people outside of their little group--sheep that do not belong to "this fold". They, too, know the Master's voice. In his commentary on John, John Calvin noted that there are, in reality, two churches: the Visible and the Invisible. The Visible Church is the church that gathers on Sunday mornings. The Invisible Church, the True Church, is the Church known only to God. It is possible, he went on to say, that not everyone in the Visible Church is a member of the Invisible Church, and it is definitely true that not everyone in the Invisible Church is a part of the Visible Church.

Faithfulness is known by the fruit it produces. Good trees, Jesus said, cannot produce bad fruit and bad trees cannot produce good fruit. The Apostle Paul picked up on this theme when he wrote that the "fruit of the spirit" is Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Humility, and Self-control while the fruits of the world cause nothing but divisions, jealousy, mistrust, and ultimately destruction.

In the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus called his disciples to be "fishers of men." He did not call them to be "keepers of the aquarium". Those who take him seriously are to go out onto the wild waters of life and, to mix metaphors, find the sheep not of the visible fold. We are to be a light in darkness, an alarm clock that awakens people to the salvation that is already theirs. We are called to show the broken a new Way of life, one that reveals real truth and real life.

**"I lay (my life) down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again."** This is John's equivalent of picking up Christ's Cross. You know there is a difference between a Cross and a Thorn in the Side. We have a choice when it comes to the Cross of Christ. We do not have a choice when it comes to a Thorn in the Side. My stutter may be seen as a Thorn--it is just a given, a part of who I am. A Cross, though, is something that we choose; we choose to take Jesus seriously. We choose to embrace his teachings and apply them to our lives.

If you walk the Appalachian Trail where hikers cross from Pennsylvania into New Jersey, you will see The Presbyterian Church of the Mountain, a small country church seemingly in the middle of nowhere. Walking up its steep gravel driveway between March and November, you will see a grassy knoll with an array of colorful pitched pup tents. Near the tents you will see plastic lawn chairs doubling as drying racks draped with underwear, trousers, shorts and soggy socks, open backpacks, and worn hiking boots getting dried out and a good airing. If you go inside the church you will see that the basement has been transformed into a hostel, of sorts, complete with a communal living, restrooms, a bunk room and showers. During the peak season this oasis serves a hot dinner, fresh towels and transportation for those who need a doctor or emergency or even a few supplies at nearby stores.

Through this ministry to the hikers of the Appalachian Trail a once dying church experienced a resurrection. In 1976 they had 15 worshipers. Facing death they experienced Resurrection. They could have done one of two things; they could have circled the wagons and looked inward, or throw caution to the wind and take "a flyer". They chose the latter course. They chose, in the words of Jesus, to willingly lay their lives down for God's sheep that lay outside of their fold. They knew that God has planted them there and sustained them through the years to be a blessing and an outpost to the world and their community. They asked themselves how they could live out their "call", their baptism. How could they show God's love to the world? Through discussion and prayer--and resistance and more prayer--they ultimately decided to open their church building to the Appalachian Trail hikers whom they had never met. It was a risky proposition but they took their discipleship seriously.

Today, the church is no longer on the brink of extinction. They are thriving. They found new life through this ministry of hospitality. Over the years they have ministered to Austria, Germany, Australia, Scotland and nearly every state in the Union.

In her book [A Course in Miracles](#) Marianne Williamson wrote:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, Jesus once said. It may be “small” but it does not remain small. It grows. The Presbyterian Church of the Mountain knew that doing the same thing and expecting different results was the very definition of insanity. Rather than play small, they decided to take Jesus seriously--take the risk of discipleship reaching out to their neighbors and the world around them. In our gospel lesson Jesus talked about willingly laying his life down.

Over the past ten years I have volunteered an hour a week at Thomas Jefferson, reading to and being read to by second graders. Not too long ago I was troubled when one of my young students told me, before we started reading, that she had not had breakfast yet. She was late getting to school. Now you may not be aware of the fact that every child in our citywide school district gets a free breakfast to start their day. I knew that my little charge would not be able to focus with an empty growling stomach so I took her to the cafeteria. The breakfast crew was still there. Their stations were still set up. There was a milk station, a food station, a fruit station and a juice station. I was troubled when I learned that at the milk station my student has to choose between a piece of string cheese and a carton of milk. She could not have both. Her milk choice was white or chocolate. Well, you know what she chose; chocolate milk. At the food station she was given a frosted pop tart. At the fruit station an apple. At the juice station, a carton of sweetened apple juice. So, she walked away with all of the elements of a “sugar high”; chocolate milk, frosted pop tart, an apple that she may or may not eat, and apple juice.

I talked to head of nutrition and was told that the government program that makes breakfast possible only allows one milk product. I think that it could be argued that chocolate milk is on the edge of the milk food group compared to a piece of string cheese or white milk. I got to thinking, if these children are dependent upon a school breakfast, what do they do during the summer when school is no longer in session.

This church has done an excellent job in the area of mission. The flags in the back of the sanctuary remind us of all the countries that we have done mission. The most recent flag--that of Kenya--reminds us of the street boys of Mombasa, Kenya who have a new start because we planted a group home and continue to support that ministry called Wana Wa Mola--Swahili for “God’s Children”. This year we will build our sixth Habitat house, the second most houses built by a congregation. Every week volunteers gather in the Life Together Center and pack over 200 weekend snack packs for the children of Whittier elementary school and Common Place. As I reflected upon all of this I wondered why it wouldn’t be possible for us to help feed a healthy breakfast to the students of Thomas Jefferson during the summer months. We have the talent pool and the resources for this ministry. I would like for us to pray and explore whether or not this is a ministry that God is calling us to do.

We have been richly blessed. We have been saved to serve. It does no one any favors to “play small”. We do not serve a small God, but a God that is bigger than the Universe and Eternity itself.

To God be the glory. Amen.