

## ***Flipping the Script***

Psalm 5, Luke 15:1-10

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Jesus told a parable, and in parables, the characters always stand for something else. In the parable of the “lost” sheep, of course, Jesus is not talking about sheep. He is talking about people.

Now most times we hear this story and we think, “stupid sheep,” why didn’t it come when called? Most times we hear this story, we blame the sheep for being lost, because, of course, this is about sinners.

But today, let’s flip the script a little and imagine a different story. This time with people. This time with the 99 being the ones who need to repent and turn their lives around.

The 99 sheep are the church in this telling. They are the good people, the ones who do what the shepherd says, or so they imagine. They have a set of rules and practices handed down over generations that they never question. They are righteously righteous!

One day, someone new appears in their midst. We’ll call them “Rainbow Sheep.” Rainbow Sheep was different for sure, the 99 observed. Rainbow sheep questioned some of those rules and practices, saying they didn’t think that’s really what the Shepherd intended. Rainbow Sheep thought the most important thing in following the Shepherd was love, respect, caring, trust, hospitality.

But the other sheep disagreed. One day they got together and sent Rainbow Sheep away because the church members thought Rainbow was, and here’s an old churchy word, “Anathema.” Anathema means an outrage against God. Synonyms for Anathema include abhorrent, hateful, odious, repugnant, repellent, offensive. Unworthy of their love. Unworthy of praising God beside them. Unworthy of being in relationship with God even.

When the great Shepherd, God, came along, God wondered where Rainbow Sheep had gone. The other sheep, all righteous, declared that they had taken care of the problem; they had gotten rid of one who did

not belong. Rainbow Sheep was somewhere out there alone; good riddens!

God sighed that deep sigh that God sighs a lot. Then God realized that Rainbow Sheep must be frightened, lonely, sad, and lost, probably thinking that because the church didn't love them, God wouldn't, either. God took one long look at the 99, and said, "I'm going to get Rainbow Sheep. And when we get back, we're going to start all over again on learning how to love one another as you are loved by me."

God searched all over for Rainbow Sheep. Rainbow saw God looking and hid for fear God was coming to hate them, too. But God gently coaxed Rainbow out of hiding, picked them up in a huge embrace, and said, "We're going home." Rainbow wanted to respond, "But that's not home; they don't love me, they want me to change and be like them but I can't!" but they stayed silent because God's presence of love was so powerful there was nothing more to be said.

When they got back, God looked at the church of the 99, who were prepared for a lecture about repenting and making amends, and said, "let's have a party! Let's celebrate that now we are all whole, because Rainbow Sheep is back. Now, and only now, are we church." To say **that** was unexpected is an understatement. But party they did, slowly at first as they weren't sure quite how to love Rainbow, or each other for that matter. God helped them, and soon they were dancing and eating and singing and laughing together. Then, and only then, they were church.

The Psalmist writes, "Let all who take refuge in you, O God, rejoice; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, so that those who love your name may exult in you." One commentator on the parable we read wrote this: "Properly understood, then, the church isn't primarily a circle of moral excellence and respectability. Rather, it's primarily a circle of joy, of celebration, of reveling in what the God of grace and mercy has done, is doing, and will do." (*Salt* commentary, 9/10/19) In order to revel properly, we need everyone to know that this is a party to which everyone is invited. Let's work together to make sure that Rainbow Sheep know that this is their flock, too. Amen.