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“The Flock’s Investigation: The Myth of the Winter Lamb”
Luke 15:1-10, 1 Corinthians 12:20-25

“Do I live in a friendly or a hostile universe?”

This is the question that Albert Einstein believed to be foundational to how we live our lives. Is it a universe filled with hostility and threats to our survival at every turn? Or is it a universe infused with grace, care, and abundant life?

What we believe about the universe, the world, and others matters greatly because it forms the baseline for how we navigate reality. It dictates whether we move forward with fear or love as our default state. In our daily lives, a hostile perspective manifests as chronic worry, anxiety, cynicism, and conflict. A friendly, grace-filled perspective shows up as care, compassion, patience, and true connection.

One of the most telling indicators of our underlying posture toward the world is how we respond to difference. When we reject others based on human categories - whether race, physical appearance, political views, gender identity, socioeconomic background, or any other division we devise—we reveal our fear. Across history and within our current world, this fear plays out in wars, prejudice, violence, and exclusion.

In a clip from the film *The Sheep Detectives,* we see this exact dynamic play out among a flock of sheep handling what they call a “winter lamb.” This speckled little creature is shunned by the flock simply because he was born out of the expected birth season of spring. Perceived as an oddity, he is left to fend for himself. When one lamb asks why the shepherd, George, treats the winter lamb with such tenderness, an older sheep replies that George isn't a sheep, so "no one's ever taught him about winter lambs": https://youtu.be/EjXOTzqjGPY.

The flock operates out of a strict, unwritten rule of exclusion, but the Good Shepherd operates out of love. George loves the lamb not merely because he is kind, but because he sees inherent value where the flock sees an unwanted disruption.

When people feel like a threat because of their differences, or when they disappoint us and fail to meet our expectations, our natural impulse is to write them off. Writing people off is a coping mechanism—an attempt to preserve a sense of control and order in an unpredictable world. We do this to individuals, and we do it to entire groups. We label them, place them in neat categories, keep them at a distance, and eventually become completely indifferent to their well-being.

Jesus faced this exact attitude from the religious leaders of his day, who had effectively written off major segments of society as hopeless sinners. In Luke 15, we find tax collectors and notorious sinners gathering around Jesus to listen to him. The Pharisees and religious scholars begin to grumble, insisting that a devout person would never associate with people outside the bounds of acceptable social and moral circles. They lived by the adage, *"You are known by the company you keep."*
In those days, a "sinner" wasn't simply someone who committed a personal moral failing. The term often applied to those whose very occupation forced them to work outside or violate Mosaic Law - such as pig keepers, pigeon raisers, shepherds, Samaritans, or

those who sold their ancestral land. Tax collectors were viewed with even greater hostility as political collaborators who bought rights from Rome and extracted extra wealth for themselves. They were socially rejected and systematically ostracized.

Against these accusations, Jesus presents a revolutionary perspective on the Kingdom of God through three parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son.
In Luke 15:1–7, Jesus poses a question:

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. **2** And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”
3 So he told them this parable: **4** “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? **5** And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. **6** And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep.’ **7** Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

To the listeners of his day, this kind of behavior seemed utterly reckless. What shepherd leaves ninety-nine vulnerable sheep in the open wilderness to chase after a single straggler? What woman throws an expensive party for her neighbors just because she found one silver coin, spending the very wealth she worked so hard to recover? And what father welcomes back a prodigal child who wasted his inheritance, showering him with honor instead of judgment?

Jesus was demonstrating that Kingdom love often appears foolish by worldly standards. To human systems built on merit, order, and social division, grace makes no sense. But in the Kingdom of God, no one is disposable. God does not measure worth using human categories or cultural expectations.

As Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 12, the body is not one member, but many. God has arranged each part of the body purposefully, so that there should be no division, but rather that every member has equal concern for one another. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

When we feel like the "winter lamb"—out of place, misunderstood, or rejected by the flock—Jesus invites us to reframe our reality. We do not live in a hostile universe governed by scarcity and exclusion; we live in a grace-filled universe governed by a Shepherd who leaves the fold to find us. And when we realize how deeply we are loved, we are called to lay down our fear-based categories and reflect that same relentless love to others. This is the transformation that happened in *The Sheep Detectives*. The sheep not only solved the murder mystery, they also learned the true lesson of love from their shepherd and they finally saw the winter lamb for what it is, an important member of their family: https://youtu.be/SF-xqoeBONQ.

Guided Meditation & Closing Prayer
Take a deep, slow breath in... and let it out softly. Allow the noise of the past week to settle. Release the tension in your shoulders, your hands, your mind. Imagine, for a moment, an open green field under a broad, warm sky.

Notice where you are standing in this field. Perhaps you feel like part of the flock—safe,

comfortable, surrounded by what is familiar. Or perhaps, in some area of your life right now, you feel like the winter lamb. You feel out of step with those around you, misplaced, unneeded, or quietly written off. Hold whatever that feeling is in your mind for just a moment. Now, picture the Good Shepherd walking across the hill toward you.
Notice how he walks. He is not hurrying in anger. He is not carrying a list of your mistakes or holding you to the expectations of the crowd. He kneels down right where you are. Feel the warmth of his hands as he gathers you up. Feel the relief of being carried on strong shoulders—held by a love that does not depend on whether you fit into the standards of the world.

Listen as he speaks over you:
"You belong. You are precious. You are found."

(Pause for a moment of quiet reflection)

Now, while still held securely in that posture of grace, look outward into the field with the Shepherd. Who is standing on the fringes of your life? Who have you quietly written off, labeled, or kept at a distance? Who in your community, your family, or your workplace feels like a "winter lamb"? Allow the Shepherd's eyes to become your eyes. See their value, their beauty, and their place in God's creation.

Let us pray:
Gracious God, Shepherd of us all, thank you for searching for us when we are lost, and for loving us when we feel out of place. Forgive us for the times we have built fences instead of opening our arms, and for the times we have let fear dictate who belongs. Remind us daily that we live in a universe held together by your love. Soften our hearts toward those who are different from us, and give us the courage to love with the same reckless, joyful grace that brought us home. In the name of Jesus, our Good Shepherd, Amen.