

**HEARTS  
ABLAZE**

**PARABLES  
FOR THE  
QUEER SOUL**

**ROLF NOLASCO JR.**



Morehouse Publishing  
NEW YORK

Copyright © 2022 by Rolf Nolasco Jr.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

Unless otherwise noted, the Scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com). The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scripture quotations marked (NKJV) taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Morehouse Publishing, 19 East 34th Street, New York, NY 10016  
Morehouse Publishing is an imprint of Church Publishing Incorporated.

Cover design by Dylan Marcus McConnell, Tiny Little Hammers  
Typeset by Denise Hoff

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Nolasco, Rolf, 1967- author.

Title: Hearts ablaze : parables for the queer soul / Rolf Nolasco, Jr.

Description: New York, NY : Morehouse Publishing, [2022] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022023033 (print) | LCCN 2022023034 (ebook) | ISBN 9781640653658 (paperback) | ISBN 9781640653665 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Jesus Christ--Parables. | Christian sexual minorities--Religious life.

Classification: LCC BT375.3 .N65 2022 (print) | LCC BT375.3 (ebook) | DDC 226.8/06--dc23/eng/20220725

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022023033>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022023034>

*For all my Fab Queer Siblings,  
especially Queer People of Color  
who love fiercely,  
regardless*

*&*

*Mama Lulu  
who loves me,  
just because*

# CONTENTS

## INTRODUCTION 1

Queer Eye for the Parables of Jesus

## CHAPTER 1 13

TLC: The Parable of the Good Shepherd

## CHAPTER 2 29

Don't Forget to RSVP:  
The Parable of the Great Banquet

## CHAPTER 3 45

The Queerdom of God:  
The Parable of the Mustard Seed

## CHAPTER 4 61

Queer Joy:  
The Parable of the Hidden Treasure

## CHAPTER 5 75

Q-Connections:  
The Parable of the Sower

## CHAPTER 6 91

Queer Bodies:  
The Parable of New Wine in Old Wineskins

**CHAPTER 7** 107

Queer Father:  
The Parable of the Lost Son

**CHAPTER 8** 125

Neighborly Love:  
The Parable of the Good Samaritan

**CHAPTER 9** 141

Queers' Got Talent:  
The Parable of the Talents

**CHAPTER 10** 155

Queer Christ:  
The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders

**EPILOGUE** 169

Queer Divine:  
The Man among the Tombs

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS** 183

**NOTES** 185

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** 193



**CHAPTER 1**

**TLC**

**The Parable  
of the Good Shepherd**

John 10:1–5

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.

*This short meditation renders queer folk as sheepfold who receive some TLC, or tender loving care, by the Good Shepherd.*

“We don’t ask, and you don’t tell us” is a phrase June heard repeatedly from folks involved in her ordination process early on, and she is “tired . . . very tired” of hearing it. It wasn’t the first time she had been warned to hide her sexuality, to not speak of her truth, to not let her authentic self come out in her quest to listen and respond to God’s call on her life.

Growing up in a very conservative environment, June was already conditioned to believe, through constant and consistent messaging from the pulpit, that her sexuality conflicted with her faith. Deep down she knew her “church would not give an answer, and the Bible too does not give a clear answer on these issues.” But she was unrelenting. Her inner voice, though faint and often drowned out by a cacophony of lies, guided her. She set out on an adventure to discover a path that would help her reconcile these two important and fluid aspects of her identity.

I thought studying theology would help, but that did not yield much helpful information, as the school I went to was so male centered. I moved to an all-women’s college, and there I was introduced to feminist theology, which cracked open a new path for me. I

thought, *If I go this direction, I may find something that will counteract the message I have been hearing all these years.* Everybody says it is not God's will, but deep in my heart I don't think God is really against it.

June heard the voice and knew who it was.

### *The Shepherd's Voice*

The parable of the good shepherd in John 10:1–5 holds the familiar theme of hearing and knowing a particular voice amid the noise, exacerbated by the presence of thieves and strangers. Before we reveal the parable's queer potential, Avedis Boynerian offers an up-close and personal account of shepherding in the Middle East.

Early each morning the flock starts to get excited because they have had nothing to eat for fourteen hours or more. In addition to being hungry, they are restless from being cooped up all night. As daylight increases, they gradually become more and more active and eager. Finally, they hear the shepherd's voice outside the barred sheepfold door. As soon as the door is opened by a member of the family, the shepherd calls the animals again and



they rush out eagerly anticipating a new day full of lush grass, fresh mountain air, shady trees, and rest beside peaceful waters. The new sheep runs around and around banging its head against the rough stone walls of the sheepfold emitting a stream of pitiful, heartbreaking cries. It needs a few days of “therapy” to retrain its ear to recognize the voice of the new shepherd.<sup>1</sup>

With this as a backdrop, let us explore the queer-able (queering the parable) of the good shepherd in John 10. We will focus on the first five verses, though we will look at the rest of the parable to deepen our queer commentary.

The parable starts with a threat from outside—from a thief “who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way” (v. 1). During those times, the shepherd faced threats from thieves and strangers, who were a danger everywhere, and from wild animals.<sup>2</sup> The thief’s sole mission was to steal a sheep by force by climbing over the wall of the sheepfold at night when everyone is asleep. They might come with a ladder and a plan of operation, or with an accomplice to make a quick steal and escape. Often, the operation was violent because thieves had one purpose in mind: to “steal and kill and destroy” (v. 10). Queer folk have fallen in the hands of these kinds of people and have suffered a similar plight with frightening regularity.

The other potential human threat is a “stranger” (v. 5). Though not a thief, the stranger could cause noise, confusion, and disruption because their call was unfamiliar; theirs was an unrecognizable voice, especially for the young sheep—a voice that could lead to harm, even death and destruction. Hence, the sheep ran away because they did not recognize the stranger’s voice. The inclusion of the stranger in the parable is a way of unveiling those considered strangers in Jesus’s time: “the sectarians outside Jericho, the high priestly guild in the temple, and the scribes and Pharisees . . . Hellenists, the Herodians, Zealots and Sadducees.”<sup>3</sup> Queer folk, due to their vulnerability, internalized homophobia and transphobia, and a longing to belong and be accepted, have been co-opted, tokenized, used, and abused by those whose intent is to further their cis/heterosexist agenda.

Carefully inserted between the thief and the stranger is the good shepherd whose portrayal in the parable evokes familiarity, intimacy, and faithful accompaniment. Unlike the thief who climbed over the wall or the stranger who caused confusion, the shepherd went straight through the door of the sheepfold in broad daylight. No escape plan or manipulative ruse, just a simple, regular, and ordinary trek to the sheepfold. Verse 3, which includes a short and to-the-point description, provides a clear characterization of the good shepherd.

The sheep hear his voice [familiarity].  
He calls his own sheep by name [intimacy]  
and leads them out [faithful accompaniment].

The voice of the shepherd is central to this parable. Shepherds called out with a chant, using a bamboo flute, or, most commonly, a simple cry, “Haa, haa, ta’o, ta’o.”<sup>4</sup> The flock heard, recognized, and rested in the familiarity of the unique tone and resonance of the shepherd’s voice. Other herders might have sung the same familiar tune, but the sheep knew the particular timbre that caused their ears to perk up.

For the shepherd to lead and care for their flock, the sheep had to hear and follow, but the scenario is anything but simple because the sheep were often mixed in among other flocks whose shepherds had varying calls.<sup>5</sup> It was chaotic and loud and busy in the narrow streets of those Palestinian villages, yet the sheep had sharp ears and would only follow the voice of their own shepherd.

This familiarity was further deepened by the shepherd calling his sheep by name (v. 3). The bond was unmistakable and the connection as real as those we witness or expect of intimate human relations—there is liking, even favoritism and delight to make the other person feel special and significant: “Some sheep always keep near the shepherd and are his special favorites. Each of them has a name, to which it answers joyfully, and the kind shepherd is ever distributing to such choice portions which he gathers for that purpose.”<sup>6</sup>

The naming made proximity to the shepherd easier, if not inevitable, and also revealed the shepherd's abiding presence, deep regard, sensitive care, and intimate knowledge of his flock.

The familiarity and intimacy gave rise to the shepherd's next move—leading them out: “When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice” (v. 4). The good shepherd did not use force to keep the sheep moving in a particular direction or impatiently go far ahead of his flock, leaving them abandoned, lost, or scattered. He led them out, all of them out; not one was left behind, because he was an intentional, careful, and gentle shepherd. He went on ahead, neither too close nor too far, but just enough so the flock could still hear his distinct voice clearly and follow him into the vast wilderness in search of green pastures. This faithful accompaniment provided assurance of the shepherd's abiding presence throughout the journey and unwavering trust that he would lead them to a pasture where they could graze, drink, and rest. The parable shows that attending to the flock's well-being is at the heart of what it means to be a good shepherd.

### *The Queer Flock*

Queer folk can glean (or graze) many life parallels from this parable (or pasture). Let's start with the traditional title—the Good Shepherd. Eight texts in the Bible

identify the shepherd: four times in the Hebrew Bible referring to God (Psalm 23; Jeremiah 23; Ezekiel 34; Zechariah 10) and four times in the New Testament referring to Christ (Matthew 18; Mark 6; Luke 15; John 10). God or Christ as the Good Shepherd occupied the imagination of the early church, which is often depicted as the “religion of the Good Shepherd. The kindness, the courage, the grace, the love, the beauty of the Good Shepherd was to them, if we may so say, Prayer Book and Articles, Creeds, and Canons, all in one.”<sup>7</sup> In their hearts and minds, they saw and experienced the nearness and tender care of God.

Interestingly, the image of the good shepherd (along with such symbols as the fish and the vine) almost disappeared after the fourth century and was replaced with dogmas and decrees. Instead of the image of the shepherd that suggested “the recovery of the lost sheep, the tender care and protection, the green pasture and fresh foundation, the sacrifice of life: in a word the whole picture of a Savior,”<sup>8</sup> having the right belief or doctrine took center stage; doing rightly receded to the background.

The dominant divine image that most queer folk have from the pulpit and other religious spaces when talking (or writing) about human sexuality is a queer-hating, cis/hetero-affirming, masculine-worshipping, judgmental, and punitive God who sends queer folk to hell for being ungodly—meaning, not straight. This parable recovers the ancient and much needed image of a God and Christ who tend for and accompany us

ever so intentionally, gently, and faithfully through the maze that is life. It is an image of presence, not punishment.

• • •

“I started talking to God about my sexuality when I was in fifth grade,” June reminisced. “I knew that I liked girls. I was even attracted to one of my female friends. Of course, I was afraid back then because I was taught to believe it wasn’t normal to feel this way, and I talked to God about it. I actually talk to God a lot, like a friend.”

I could feel a sense of freedom and lightness as June shared this part of her story. Contrary to what she was told during her ordination process—“we don’t ask, you don’t tell us”—she felt she could be unabashedly honest and candid with God. In a way, she was buoyed by this unspoken invitation—“just tell me and I will listen”—that freed her to simply be, as she is, in the presence of God.

Like the flock in the parable, June finds the image of God as the Good Shepherd very safe. At a very young age, she heard the nonjudgmental and familiar voice of God. Even in the cacophony of lies and the vitriolic speech that proliferates cis/hetero spaces, she discerned rather starkly the still, small, and gentle voice of God affirming all that she is without conditions, erasures, or censorship. And that was enough for her to express her heart’s desire, ask lingering

questions and address fear about her burgeoning sexuality, and perhaps lean into a childlike faith and resistance against imposters.

There are people and communities who steal queer joy by repeatedly arousing fear and expressing the disgust inherent in the normative discourse on human sexuality. And they do so strategically, with destructive and often fatal consequences. The same message of condemnation is directed at queer folk time and time again. This incessant messaging comes with the invocation of the sacred: it is God's will that we all be heterosexuals. The thief wears a "holy garb" and utters "holy speech" as a way of regulating erotic desires and privileging cis/heteronormativity.

Second, this hetero-talk comes with an emotional booster, disgust that elicits a combination of physical and behavioral aversive reactions. Since queer life is labeled by some as a moral offense, it generates "avoidance of disgust treats" that put queer folk in vulnerable and precarious situations.<sup>9</sup> Pairing vitriolic speech with disgust is a way of pushing the source of "unpleasantness away to a more comfortable psychological distance" that often leads to death, profound bodily injury, or "moments which position queer subjects as failed in their failure to live up to the heterosexual norm."<sup>10</sup>

Then come those who sing the same tune as the good shepherd, but their voice is too strange for the sheep to follow. Here, queer inclusion is half-hearted and often only for appearance's sake. In other words,

queer folk are tokenized. These strangers use the same song—progressive and persuasive words of inclusion—yet task queer subjects to carry the heavy burden of justice making. Worse, rewards and recognition are often doled out to institutions with inclusionary practices, while behind closed doors, we witness fatigued, overutilized (and often underpaid), and even harassed queer folk. Simply, the flock's needs and well-being are verbally promised but not usually delivered.

Not so with the Good Shepherd, whose proximity is closer than we think and whose affections toward us remain steadfast and assured. I take the shepherd's act of naming his sheep in the parable as God's naming or calling us into existence. Our Good Shepherd breathes life into our queerness—excitedly anticipating our flourishing, even facilitating its fruition—for we bear the image of God in every queer way (v. 10). Remember this: we are not defective heterosexuals, but icons of the “Triune God just like everyone else, a window into the spacious gratuitous and transforming love of God.”<sup>11</sup>

There's another dimension to this intimacy that we know quite well as God's queer flock, which June poignantly captured when she expressed, “In the midst of this pain we can meet God because God is with us when we are in pain.” That has been her testimony, and I am sure it is the same for other countless queer folk whose lives are marked by incalculable pain and trauma because of who we are and whom we love. The image of a shepherd carrying a wounded sheep on



his shoulder to ease the pain and make easier the journey to healing and recovery comes to mind so vividly when I visualize this image.

Christ, the Good Shepherd, goes further than merely providing us tender loving care during those dark and painful moments. He goes ahead of the sheep (v. 4) and “lays down his life for the sheep” (v. 11), which in christological terms is very significant. The kenotic or self-emptying hymn in Philippians 2 describes Christ’s unsettling but liberating identification with us, a paradigmatic example of utter dispossession:

[Christ], being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!  
(vv. 6–8, NIV)

In other words, he willingly subjected himself to extreme humiliation by occupying the place of shame (a common experience for queer folk), not to appease God’s vengeful intentions but to make plain our own tendency for violence. He did not accomplish all this to shame us or make us feel guilty, but to grant us

unqualified forgiveness so we can begin to live differently and truly treat each other as image bearers of a loving, forgiving, and compassionate God.<sup>12</sup>

This may be difficult to grasp, especially for those of us whose experience of the divine is mediated by thieves and strangers dressed as shepherds. There is no judgment from the true Shepherd who weeps at the sight of his wounded queer flock and who desires only our healing and freedom from the shackles of sacred violence that is cis/heteronormativity. And so, wherever we are in this journey, Christ's love for us precedes, transcends, and is beyond all that deters us from flourishing. Even at our weakest moments, the shepherd's forgiving heart, tender loving care, and gaze remain unchanged because God's only intention for God's queer flock is to heal our fragmented selves, help us remember our sacred worth, restore our place in the queerness, and bring us back to the sheepfold.

This healing and hope is not reserved only for the few; the shepherd leads them *all* out (v. 3). No one is left behind, scattered, abandoned, or lost—a different story from the way the heterosexist world operates. In their attempt to control, surveil, and regulate the queer community, the heterosexist world has created a sexual identity framework that divides people into two warring groups. The “in group” (heterosexual) has distinguishable notions of order, goodness, and moral superiority, and the “out group” (gender and sexual minority) is deemed to have fallen from sacred favor and grace and therefore deserves death and destruction.

But the Good Shepherd will not go ahead of the flock until *everyone* is accounted for, until *everyone* gets a sit at the table, until *everyone* is affirmed, deployed, and celebrated as a key figure in the religious life of the faith community. Sometimes we cry out, “Come, Lord Jesus, come” as the pain, trauma, and exclusionary practices are too overwhelming to bear, work through, and address. Indeed, the struggle is real and often comes with material, even fatal, consequences. But as we listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, we can hope that Christ’s descent toward the “downward path of dishonor, suffering, and self-renouncing love”<sup>13</sup> is also his way of entering the depths of human vulnerability and, by extension, directly experiencing the very depths of our woundedness.

He is also searching for those of us who have been exiled and scattered, like a shepherd who will not leave until all have come out (and coming out, in whatever form and time this may take, is an important part of queer self-assertion). And when our bruised and broken selves are found by our Good Shepherd, he will feed and care for us, hold us with comfort, tender loving care, and focused intent to heal and restore us. Perhaps, as he carries us on his shoulders, we can lean into the “voice of God, the creator and holder in being, the love and gatherer of the weak, a voice far too quiet to be able to be heard in the midst of all that wrath of spurned love.”<sup>14</sup>

The struggle for LGBTQIA+ inclusion within June’s denomination looms large. And yet, amid all

this, June has found hope and inspiration from her queer siblings and allies who told her that she will be appointed to a reconciling church and that she has her bishop's support in all of this. This gave her much-needed assurance and confirmation of God's call on her life: "I just want a church that I could pastor. I feel called to this. I am not in ministry only for LGBTQ equality. I am a pastor who happens to be a lesbian, and so if I am in a church who sees no issue with the pastor who happens to be a lesbian, then I'd be happy to serve."

The sheep who has been lovingly and faithfully shepherded by the Good Shepherd is now ready to provide this same tender loving care toward her own flock.

So, let the queer flock gather and our theme or category is: Give us some TLC, or Tender Loving Care.