

1 Cor. 12:12-14, 21-27
Luke 4:14-21

Bodies of Christ

The Rev. Patrick S. Cheng*
Metropolitan Community Church of New York
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Good morning! I'm delighted to be here at MCC New York to celebrate the Lunar New Year with you. The Lunar New Year is a time when billions of people of Asian descent from all around the world return to their homes to be with their families and loved ones. In many ways, MCC New York is *my* spiritual home -- I was ordained here three years ago on this very feast day -- and so I'm pleased to come back today for an Asian Pacific Islander homecoming of sorts.

It's wonderful to see so many familiar faces out there. I especially wanted to thank Rev. Pat for inviting me to preach here today, Mary Jane for her warm hospitality, and Susie Chin, the members of the Asian Pacific Islander ministry, and all the members of the MCC New York music ministry for making this celebration so very special. What a wonderful service!

Well, it's the Year of the Monkey. I don't know if it's the year of God's favor, but it's the year of my favor, since I'm a monkey. It only comes once every twelve years. You're a monkey if you were born in 1992, 1980, 1968, 1956, 1944 and 1932. Are there any monkeys out there?

Anyway, for the last few years, I've been fortunate to preach about the zodiac animal that is associated with each lunar year. Two years ago, I preached about the Year of the Horse in Washington D.C. The Bible has lots of references to horses, and I focused on the arrival of Christ on a white horse in the Book of Revelation. Last year, I preached about the Year of the Sheep in Boston. The Bible also has a lot of references to sheep, and I focused on the Good Shepherd text in the Gospel According to John.

Well, this year, my luck ran out. As I mentioned, it's the Year of the Monkey. Now, I love the Year of the Monkey because it's my year. However, there are not a lot of monkeys in the Bible. There are lots of horses, sheep, snakes, pigs, dogs, and even dragons in the Bible. But not a lot of monkeys!

For those of you into Bible trivia, I discovered that there *is* one obscure reference to apes and baboons in the Bible, and it appears in the Book of First Kings. It's part of a

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list of exotic items that showed how really, really rich King Solomon was. As much as I was intrigued by ivory, cedar, apes and baboons, however, I didn't feel like that passage was a particularly good fit for a queer sermon.

Anyway, I figured that God was telling me to stick with the biblical texts that were assigned to this week's lectionary. And, as usual, God was right. Believe it or not, today's reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians about the body happens to be one of the queerest passages in the Bible, and I'm excited to explore it together with you.

Let us pray.

God, we give you thanks for this celebration of the Lunar New Year. Be with us today as we recognize the marvelous diversity of your body that is reflected in this congregation. Help us to remember that we are beautiful and loved by you -- just as we are -- and open our hearts, minds, and souls to your Word this morning. Amen.

In today's reading, Paul writes about the marvelous diversity of the body of Christ: "For just as the body is one and has many members, . . . so it is with Christ . . . Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many."

For me, the reading is a celebration of the diversity of the body, both metaphorically and literally. We, as the body of Christ, are made up of many members, of all colors, shapes, sizes, genders, abilities and ages. How appropriate for the Lunar New Year, when we celebrate the diversity of Asian Pacific Islander bodies and the presence of Asian cultures and spiritualities in our very midst! We are East Asian, Southeast Asian, South Asian and Pacific Islander. We speak Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Tagalog, and English. We come from Christian, Buddhist, Daoist and Hindi traditions. But yet we are all connected in one marvelous body.

Today's reading is also a radical affirmation of the connection between the spirit and the body. The body of Christ is explicitly linked to the physical body. Paul talks about all kinds of body parts -- the eye, the hand, the head and the feet. Paul even talks about our genitals! Did you catch that? That's what he's referring to when he talks about the "weaker" and "less honorable" members of the body. For Paul, one member cannot be seen as more important than another. One body part cannot say to the other, "I have no need of you." When one member suffers, all suffer together with it. Each are entitled to the same level of care as the other.

This is pretty radical, if you think about it. Not only are the weaker and less honorable members of the body indispensable, but they are to be treated with *greater* honor and respect! Paul is turning the values of the world completely upside down. As some queer theologians have noted, if the church is the Body of Christ, then we queer Christians are the genitals of Christ. As a result, we should to be treated with *greater* honor and respect than our non-queer counterparts, not less. No wonder this is the only part of the Bible involving the sex organs that the radical right doesn't want to talk about!

Seriously, why is it that so many of our Christian siblings fail to see us as indispensable or fail to treat us with greater respect and honor, as today's reading demands of them? According to Paul, the eye cannot say to the hand "I have no need of you." The head cannot say to the feet "I have no need of you." And yet that's what the religious right says to us all the time: "I have no need of you." Instead of being respected and honored, we queer people are demonized and scapegoated by the likes of Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and James Dobson, just as Jesus and the first-century Jewish Christians were persecuted by the Roman Empire.

According to the religious right, to be spiritual, we have to suppress our bodies and our bodily desires. We must become eunuchs for the commonwealth of God. Sex is OK -- but only if it's between one man and one woman -- as our "compassionately conservative" President pontificated from his pulpit earlier this week during the State of the Union address. So much for separation of church and state! "Save the institution of marriage!" proclaims the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston, an institution not exactly known for practicing what it preaches when it comes to sexual ethics. The political and religious leaders of today, like Pontius Pilate and the other leaders of Jesus' time, have nailed us queer people to the cross for the sake of their own lust for power.

That's how I feel whenever my twelve-year relationship with my husband Michael is attacked as being immoral or anything less than true marriage. Michael and I have shared our lives together, day in and day out, for twelve years. That's 4,380 days. And yet we are denied the over one thousand federal rights that Britney Spears and her husband received during their two days of wedded bliss in Las Vegas. If anything is *immoral*, it's the denial of full marriage rights to those of us who are queer, and our treatment as second-class citizens.

The marginalization of the body is doubly true when it comes to queer people of color today. As we've seen, sexuality can be an emotionally charged issue -- and race can be a highly charged issue as well. But if you mix sexuality together with race, the result can be nothing short of explosive.

Recently, Margaret Cho, the fabulous queer-friendly Korean American comedian, performed a comedy set that was critical of the President and the current administration. Matt Drudge posted her routine on the internet, and she was immediately bombarded with hateful email messages that attacked her sexuality, her race and her body. One message said "go back to Asia you slanted-eye whore." Another read, "the people who adore you have AIDS for a reason." Others called her a "stupid lesbo chink" (even though she's Korean American) and said that she "look[ed] like some good stock to breed with my pigs." The attacks went on and on, many in even more explicit and offensive detail.

Well, Margaret Cho being Margaret Cho, she went ahead and posted all of the messages along with the names and email addresses of her attackers on her website. Her fans started flooding the email boxes of her attackers, and, within hours, many of her attackers had apologized and were begging to have their email addresses removed from the website. Cho has since removed all identifying information from her site and called

for healing all around, but I admire her ability to stand up to these misogynistic, racist and queerphobic individuals.

What's troubling to me is all this occurred not fifty years ago, but just a few days ago. And this is just one example of the hatred and hostility that those of us who are queer-identified and Asian constantly face in our lives, both inside and outside of the queer community. On one hand, our bodies are marked as perpetual outsiders, even if we've lived in this country all of our lives. An email was posted on a popular gay website that complained about the presence of too many Asian Americans in queer spaces. The writer said: "[I] wanna know where I can go clubbing without being harassed by tons of creepy Asians . . . I am into [men with] eyelids and real noses."

We are ignored and excluded from bars, sex clubs, bathhouses and internet chatrooms, where segregation, "Whites Only" ads, and the "Abercrombie & Fitch" aesthetic is still the norm. This exclusion is further complicated in a post-9/11 world, where queer Asians of Southeast or South Asian descent are seen as terrorists and enemies by the very existence of their bodies.

On the other hand, our bodies are fetishized by certain segments of the queer population, who form "East-West" cultural alliances, arrange trips to Bangkok, and create meeting spaces for the sole purpose of getting us into bed. Now that's not always bad, but sometimes it is nice to be acknowledged from the neck up. In fact, an entire language and subculture has been created to describe the problematic dynamics of race and sexuality in the queer Asian community. "Rice queens" are white men who are exclusively into Asians. Sometimes, however, the fetishization also works the other way. "Potato queens" are Asians who are only into white men. "Sticky rice" are Asians who are into other Asians. Of course, this dynamic is further problematized by the exclusion of African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans from this discussion.

So what can we do about all this? Sometimes the problem seems to be so big that it's more than any one person can resolve. Well, I believe God is calling all of us who are marginalized with respect to our bodies -- including, but not limited to queer Asians -- to start by simply loving and liberating our bodies. When many of us hear the word "liberation," we often think only about the socio-political and economic justice issues that Jesus mentions in today's Gospel: bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free. In addition to understanding these issues as *external*, however, I believe that God is calling us *internally* to address the poverty, the captivity, the blindness and the oppression of those of us who suffer from issues of self-hate and shame with respect to our very own bodies.

We must gather and build up our own communities and discover that we are not alone, but rather part of a larger body. When Susie Chin and I started the Queer Asian Fellowship email list out of MCC New York a few years ago for people who are queer, Asian, and Christian, there were only a handful of individuals on it. Now there are well over 100 subscribers from all over the world. Progress is happening in other circles as

well. The Queer Asian Legacy Conference is coming in March to New York City, and it will be one of the largest gatherings of queer Asian Americans and our supporters in history. We will gather to celebrate our existence and to recognize that we are beautiful, just as we are.

To some extent, the queer Asian experience is a window into the larger reality of how *all of us* are marginalized to some extent for our bodies and who we are. Audre Lorde has commented on the insidious hierarchy of values in which the young is privileged over the old, the male over the female, the white over the colored, the able-bodied over the differently abled, the height-weight proportionate over the differently sized, and the straight over the queer. The list goes on and on.

For me, today's reading about the body of Christ is a radical queering of these hierarchies. It is a turning upside down of societal norms. It says "no" to the hierarchies that our culture sets up as being attractive or desirable. Those who are seen as weaker are actually indispensable, and those who are seen as less honorable and respectable are to be treated with greater honor and respect. God has arranged the body giving the greater honor to the inferior member. No member can say to another that "I have no need of you."

By being at MCC New York today -- a community that strives to honor and respect the marvelous diversity of God's creation -- we are the living embodiment of the gospel truth. We are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and straight. We are all colors, shapes, sizes, genders, abilities, spiritualities, and ages. We are all welcome in this space, because we are all made in God's image. We are beautiful, and God loves our bodies just as they are. Nobody -- not the President, not the Archbishop of Boston, not even the powers and principalities and arbiters of taste in the queer community -- can ever take that truth away from us. And *that's* what the gospel message is all about. May you have a happy and prosperous new year!

Amen.