

Trinity Cathedral, Cleveland, OH
The Second Sunday After Pentecost
Jer. 20:7-13, Rom. 6:1b-11, Matt. 10:24-39

Express Yourself

The Rev. Dr. Patrick S. Cheng
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Good morning! Can you hear me OK? What a privilege to be preaching at Trinity Cathedral today. My name is Patrick Cheng, and I'm a seminary professor at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

I'm also a newly-ordained transitional deacon in the Episcopal Church. Although I've been a minister in another denomination for over thirteen years, I was just ordained in the Diocese of Massachusetts fifteen days ago. Anyway, I want to thank Dean Lind for inviting me to help kick off Pride Week and to speak at the Dean's Forum.

At my seminary, I serve as a professor of systematic theology, which is basically a fancy way of saying that I teach the tax code about God. (If you ever don't feel like talking to someone sitting next to you on a plane or train, just say that you teach systematic theology. It's amazing how quickly the conversation comes to a grinding halt!)

Actually, systematic theology is much more interesting than it sounds. Really. I just spent the last two weeks teaching an intensive course on contemporary christology, which is the study of the person and works of Jesus Christ. For ten days, my students and I explored a multitude of ways in which different faith communities around the world think about Jesus.

We explored the historical Jesus, the interfaith Christ, the Black Christ, the feminist Christ, and the Latin American Christ. We also explored the African Christ, the Asian Christ, and the Native American Christ. We even explored the queer Christ, the transgender Christ, the intersex Christ, and the ecological Christ. Believe it or not, all of these christologies do exist!

Today's gospel describes a contemporary christology that is particularly appropriate for Pride Week: The *Out Christ*, or the Christ who expresses, or reveals, his true self, no matter how unpopular that might be. Let's face it – Jesus' message about his divine nature and God's radical, unconditional love was not exactly popular with the political and religious authorities of his day. You don't get crucified, after all, for being popular. But Jesus still insisted upon speaking truth to power.

In today's gospel, Jesus encourages his followers to express themselves, even if they are mocked or judged harshly by others. "Have no fear," Jesus says to his disciples,

of those people who would “malign” them as followers of Beelzebul or Satan. Tell the truth of the Good News “in the light,” Jesus says, and “proclaim [it] from the housetops.”

But telling the truth has a cost, as Jesus reminds us. “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” The Good News will set a “man against his father,” a “daughter against her mother,” and the “members of one’s own household” against each other.

Does this dynamic sound familiar? It should, because the early Christians were basically the queer folk of their day. It’s easy to forget that, before Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the early fourth century, Christians were seen as radical outsiders. That is, Christians were viewed as opposing the family and societal values of the dominant culture.

In fact, one of the earliest surviving art works of Jesus was a piece of wall graffiti that depicted a man with an ass’s head nailed to a cross. The graffiti made fun of a Roman soldier who worshipped this strange man-God.

The theme for Cleveland Pride this year is “Express Yourself,” or more precisely hashtag #ExpressYourself. (Feel free to tweet about my sermon, by the way – my Twitter handle is patrickscheng.) Expressing oneself is a central theme in the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. For many LGBT people and our allies, expressing ourselves means coming out of the closet about our sexualities and gender identities, fighting invisibility, and speaking in favor of marriage equality and nondiscrimination protections for LGBT people.

I remember coming out to my mom in 1989, some twenty five years ago. Expressing myself at that time was definitely an issue. In fact, I had moved all the way across the country for college – from the West Coast to the East Coast – just so I could come out.

It was a very different world back then. The United States Supreme Court had ruled just a few years earlier that it was constitutional for states to criminalize same-sex acts. HIV/AIDS was decimating the gay male community. And it would be almost another decade before Ellen Degeneres came out of the closet on national TV.

I remember working up the courage to express myself. “MaMa,” I said to her one night when she visited me in college during my senior year. “I’m gay.” Her response showed her own anxieties as a first-generation Asian American immigrant. “Don’t tell your father or grandmother – they’ll have a heart attack,” was the first thing she said. “And what will our friends and family think?” was the second thing she said. As Jesus says in today’s gospel, telling the truth can lead to division – a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and family members against each other.

Today’s Hebrew Bible reading from the Book of Jeremiah reminds us that the prophets also faced similar derision for expressing themselves. “I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me.” Indeed, even Jeremiah’s close friends

expect him to “stumble.” But Jeremiah must express himself – the Word of God is like a “burning fire” that is “shut up” in his bones, and he cannot hold it in. The connections between being a person of faith and being queer are much closer than we think.

In fact, there is something deeply theological about expressing yourself. Today’s epistle reading is from Paul’s Letter to the Romans, and it talks about our dying to sin in Christ. As a theologian, I find that most people automatically go to sex whenever they hear the word “sin.” Am I right about that? But sin is far more than just sex. If sin is defined as that which separates us from God, then we also sin whenever we are unable to express ourselves fully – that is, whenever we hide ourselves or remain closeted about who God has created us to be.

The feminist theologian Valerie Saiving wrote back in 1960 that the quintessential sin for women was not so much pride – or lifting oneself up too high – but rather hiding, or not lifting oneself up high enough. Have you ever said to yourself, I can’t do that because I’m not good enough, smart enough, or talented enough? Or have you ever remained silent about disclosing something about yourself out of a sense of shame? That’s what Saiving meant by the sin of hiding, or self-abnegation.

And that’s why pride – or at least healthy pride – is so important for marginalized groups like LGBT people. The Out Christ reminds us that we need the grace of pride to counteract the sin of hiding or of not expressing ourselves.

It’s a very different world now than when I came out to my mom in 1989. Nineteen states now have legal same-sex marriage. Last year the Supreme Court struck down a key part of the Defense of Marriage Act. HIV/AIDS has become a chronic manageable disease for many. There are countless LGBT characters on TV and in the movies. And the Gay Games are even coming to Cleveland!

And, believe it or not, my mom has actually become a gay activist of sorts in the Asian American community, encouraging parents to love and accept their LGBT children. She loves my husband of nearly twenty-three years, Michael, and she has even become close friends with his parents.

But there is still much to be done. In speaking with David Soland, an organizer with Integrity Ohio, the Episcopal LGBT organization, I learned about the violence against trans women of color in the Cleveland area; the lack of protections for LGBT people against employment, housing, and other forms of discrimination in the State of Ohio; and the vote for marriage equality this fall. Expressing yourself is not just a secular matter; it is a theological necessity.

So as you celebrate LGBT Pride this week – either as a queer person or as an ally – remember the Out Christ and the gospel imperative to express yourself. To paraphrase St. Paul (which is a rather queer thing to do), consider yourself dead to the sin of hiding, and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Happy Pride! Amen.