

2013 AMPLIFY Conference  
Hong Kong  
1 John 4:16-20

## God Is Radical Love

The Rev. Dr. Patrick S. Cheng  
June 8, 2013

Good evening! Can you hear me OK? What a blessing it is to be here tonight. If someone had told me fifteen years ago that I would be preaching at an international conference of several hundred queer Asian Christians, I would have laughed and said that such a thing was impossible. But, as Pastor Gary reminded us at the end of last night's worship, all things are possible with God. *Zài shén fān shì dōu néng.*

The Bible is filled with stories about people who have done “impossible” things. Sarah and Abraham thought that it was impossible for them to have children at their old age. But they did. Moses thought that it was impossible for him, as someone who had a speech impediment, to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. But he did. As the Rev. Dr. O Young so wonderfully reminded us last night, David (and his entire family!) thought that it was impossible for him to become the King of Israel because he was seen as gender nonconforming. But he did. Mary thought that it was impossible to conceive Jesus because she was a virgin. But she did. Jesus' disciples thought that it was impossible for him to be raised from the dead. But he was.

And around fifteen years ago, when I first started my graduate theological education at Union Theological Seminary in New York City and developed a passion for ministering to queer Asian Christians around the world, I would have thought that a gathering like tonight's worship service was simply impossible. But here we are. Just look around at all of the beautiful faces that fill this room. Is this not absolutely amazing? Can I hear an Amen? Thanks be to God – a God for whom all things are possible!

But God does not act alone. God needs us, and our bodies, to carry out God's mission in the world. I want to take a moment to thank all those who have worked so hard to make this a holy ground for us. Thank you to Paul and Gary; Pastor Wong and Pastor Miak; O. Young and Cindi; Kurt, Kevin, Conan, Jason, Sam, Rose, Pearl, and Lai Shan; and everyone who has shown me such radical hospitality. Dear siblings in Christ, let us take a moment and show our gratitude to all the AMPLIFY organizers, musicians, translators, and other volunteers. Thank you!

### My Background

As I said earlier, it's an incredible blessing for me to be here tonight. I was actually born in Hong Kong almost forty-five years ago, and so this is a homecoming of

sorts for me. (That's a photo of me and my maternal Grandma, my *wai puo*.) My parents met and were married in Hong Kong, and I was baptized in Rosary Church, the Roman Catholic parish in Kowloon. My parents and I moved to the United States when I was just one year old, and so I've lived most of my life in diaspora, outside of Asia.

On Wednesday afternoon, I took a walk through Tsim Sha Tsui and visited the neighborhoods in which my family lived before we immigrated to the United States. It was a deeply moving experience for me. But it also reminded me of how familiar *and* strange things are for me as an Asian American person in Asia.

In some ways, I feel like the ancient Israelites in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, who had been living in Babylon for many years, and who had just returned to Jerusalem and were trying desperately to reconstruct their old ways of being. They ancient Israelites didn't have to deal with jet lag – as I have – but they did have language, cultural, and other challenges in coming home!

So I hope you will forgive me for preaching in English. I am pretty much an ABC – an American Born Chinese – or a banana, yellow on the outside, white on the inside. I grew up speaking some Mandarin Chinese at home (my mother grew up in Taiwan), but we never talked theology at home. I can ask for rice in Chinese, but I don't know how to conduct a debate about the Trinity in Chinese. So I am grateful for our talented translators. Thank you.

The theme for tonight's worship service is love. And I can't think of a better theme than love after having been surrounded by so much love at this conference. We've been an amazing community of love over the last 24 hours – living, learning, laughing, socializing, eating, and praying together. One of the classes that I teach at my seminary is early and medieval church history, and so it occurred to me that we're like a modern-day queer Asian monastery! (Well, I don't know how celibate you've been. But you get the idea.)

And what better scripture passage to reflect on love than verses 16 through 20 from the fourth chapter of the First Letter of John? These five verses have a lot to teach us as LGBT Christians. I want to highlight three lessons in particular. First, God is love. *Shén jiù shì ài*. Second, love has been perfected among us. *Ai zài wǒmen lǐmiàn déyǐ wánquán*. And third, perfect love casts out fear. *Ai jì wánquán , jiù bǎ jùpà chú qù*.

Can you repeat these three lessons after me in your own language, whatever it might be? First, God is love. *Shén jiù shì ài*. Second, love has been perfected among us. *Ai zài wǒmen lǐmiàn déyǐ wánquán*. And third, perfect love casts out fear. *Ai jì wánquán , jiù bǎ jùpà chú qù*. Wonderful! Let us look at each of these lessons in turn.

### 1. God Is Love

First, God is love. *Shén jiù shì ài*. Because we know that God is love, we can be certain that God is with us – right here, right now. Why? Because John teaches us that

“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” Can you feel all the love that is surrounding us tonight? Because we are abiding, or living, in love right now, we know that God is abiding, and living, in us right now. It doesn’t matter what anti-gay groups such as the so-called Society for Truth and Light think. *We* can be sure that God is with us.

“God is love” is particularly important for those of us who are queer Christians. Why? Because it is like the Armor of God mentioned in the Letter to the Ephesians. Here’s a photo of when I was in Xi’an last summer. Don’t I look more butch and masculine than King David did as a soldier? Rev. Dr. Cindi Love talked about the Belt of Truth yesterday afternoon at the leadership pre-conference session.

The phrase “God is love” protects us from the attacks of those who are afraid of us. The attacks just bounce right off of us! “God is love” is my standard reply to anti-gay Christians who cite the same old Bible verses over and over again. If they say Genesis 19, the Sodom and Gomorrah story, I say “God is love.” If they say Leviticus 18 and 20, the passage from the Levitical laws, I say “God is love.”

See how easy it is? Let’s try it together. If they say Romans 1, Paul’s critique of idolatry by the Gentiles, we say: “God is love.” *Shén jiù shì ài*. If they say First Corinthians 6, we say: “God is love.” *Shén jiù shì ài*. If they say First Timothy 1, we say: “God is love.” *Shén jiù shì ài*. You get the idea.

It troubles me that anti-gay Christians are so fixated on half a dozen or so verses in the Bible that don’t have anything to do with LGBT people today. Honestly, I think it has to do more with their fears – and what they might be hiding in their own closets (and I don’t think it’s just clothes!) – instead of us.

I get unsolicited hate mail all the time. Yesterday afternoon – literally while I was participating in the leadership pre-conference session – I received an email from someone who wrote: “I am sorry to be so simple minded. But if the Bible clearly classifies homosexuality as a sin and punishable by hell fire, how can you write the books you write and feel you are any where close to teaching as the Great Gospel teaches? Reference 1 Corinthians 6:9 and of course the entire city of Sodom and also Romans chapter 1.”

Unfortunately, what the writer of that email doesn’t understand is that those verses are actually talking about nonconsensual behavior in the ancient world, such as rape, exploitation, or objectification. Such acts are *never* OK, whether they are same-sex, opposite-sex, or gender-queer. Those verses simply do not condemn the kinds of loving and mutual relationships that are experienced by queer people today. And, more importantly, it’s sad that this person just doesn’t get that God is love.

I also find it bizarre how obsessed anti-gay Christians are with what queer folk do in bed, as if we are nothing more than our genitals and our entire lives are reduced to sex acts. This obsession is particularly pronounced in certain people, like some Roman

Catholic theologians, who use natural law or male-female complementarity arguments. I call this plug-and-socket theology. All that matters is that the plug fits into the socket! Never mind that God completely rejected plug-and-socket theology in the incarnation and the virgin birth. Again, these theologians are missing the larger point about our beautiful queer lives – that our lives are ultimately grounded in love, and thus we abide and live in God.

It is time that we shift the debate to love. Why should we continue to debate only six or so verses, when there are nearly *seven hundred* occurrences of the word “love” in the Bible? It’s time that we insist on what really matters – love.

I can testify first-hand to experiencing God by living in love. I have been with my husband Michael for almost twenty-two years. Yes, twenty-two years. We met back in July 1991 through a gay newspaper personals ad – this was before the internet, hook-up sites, or Grindr! – and we’ve been together ever since then. There is no way that I could have become an ordained minister, a queer theologian, and a seminary professor without having experienced God’s love through my relationship with Michael. As John teaches us in his First Letter: “We love because God first loved us.” *Wōmen ài, yīnwei shén xiān ài women*. How are we, as queer people, supposed to love other people if we can’t first experience God’s embodied love through others? Does God want us all to be queer Asian monks? I think not.

God is present whenever queer people get together and love one another, whether here at AMPLIFY, or in non-religious spaces. For example, I really admire the work of the Big Love Alliance here in Hong Kong. Their activism in support of queer civil rights is a powerful witness to God’s presence in the LGBT community. Queer love may be “Big Love,” but the good news is that the biggest love of all is God’s love. To paraphrase the late, great singer Whitney Houston – as well as the eleventh-century theologian Anselm of Canterbury – God’s love is the greatest love of all. God is love. *Shén jiù shì ài*.

## 2. Love Has Been Perfected Among Us

Second, love has been perfected among us. *Ài zài wōmen lǐmiàn déyǐ wánquán*. For us Christians, love is not just an abstract intellectual matter that we read about in a philosophy book. Rather, love has become incarnate and has taken on human form. Perfect love has been enfleshed in the person of Jesus Christ. When John writes that “love has been perfected among us,” he is referring to the perfection that occurs in the person of Jesus.

We are called to follow this perfect love and to be in the world as Jesus has been in the world. As John teaches us, “as he is, so are we in this world.” *Yīnwei tā rúhé, wōmen zài zhè shìshang yě rúhé*. And, by being like Jesus, we can have boldness – or confidence – on the day of judgment. In other words, we are to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ’s ministry.

So what does it mean, my dear siblings in Christ, to follow Jesus Christ in this world? I believe that following Christ means that we are called to be disciples of love – and, more specifically, disciples of radical love. In my book *Radical Love*, I define radical love as a love that is so strong that it dissolves or erases the boundaries that separate us.

For example, when I fell in love with my husband Michael, I experienced a radical love that dissolved or erased the boundaries that separated us. Even though we were two men, there was a merging of our separate selves – physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual – that continues to this very day. This is the same radical love that dissolves or erases the sexual and gender boundaries of female and male, and feminine and masculine, in queer people – boundaries that are normally understood as being fixed.

Jesus’ ministry was all about radical love. He challenged the Levitical laws – the religious system of what was clean and unclean in his day. It was unthinkable that he, as a rabbi, would touch people with skin diseases, interact with women who were bleeding, and eat with prostitutes and sinners. Jesus’ ministry literally turned things upside down, and he fundamentally challenged what was considered respectable in Ancient Israelite society. For that he was put to death by the religious and political authorities of his day.

But there was more to Jesus Christ’s radical love than just his ministry on earth. Through his incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, Jesus Christ broke down and erased the traditional boundaries that divided life from death, and divided divinity from humanity. Categories such as life and death, divinity and humanity – normally thought to be separate – were collapsed and brought together. The movement from the crucifixion of Good Friday to the resurrection of Easter Sunday is radical love! The movement from expectant waiting of Advent to the incarnation of Christmas is radical love! In Jesus, love – that is, radical love – has been perfected among us. *Ai zai wǒmen lǐmiàn déyǐ wánquán.*

Jesus’ ministry of radical love was continued by Peter, who was told by God in a dream to erase the boundaries between clean and unclean foods. Jesus’ ministry of radical love was continued by Paul, whose entire ministry focused on erasing the boundaries between Jews and Gentiles. And Jesus’ ministry of radical love is continued by each and every one of us present on this holy ground tonight!

In the same way that Jesus Christ touched and embraced those who were unclean in Ancient Israelite society, Christians are called to break down and erase barriers of sexuality, gender identity, race, class, and other divisions. We can see this radical love in the religious signatories to the Covenant of the Rainbow document that affirms the equality of sexual minorities and our rights to anti-discrimination protections.

Ironically, it is the work of secular queer groups that often bear witness to this radical love. For example, in Hong Kong, we see the presence of radical love in the theme of “injustice” from this year’s International Day Against Homophobia and

Transphobia, or IDAHOT. We see this radical love in the courage of Ms. W., the transwoman who recently won the right to marry her boyfriend in the Hong Kong Court of Final Appeal. And we see this radical love in the “I am ME” anti-bullying campaign by the Pink Alliance.

And we see this in all of your amazing work across Asia, whether it is Australia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, or Taiwan.

We are blessed to see in the work of these groups that love has been perfected among us. *Ai zài wǒmen lǐmiàn déyǐ wánquán.*

### 3. Perfect Love Casts Out Fear

Third, perfect love casts out fear. *Ai jì wánquán , jiù bǎ jùpà chú qù.* If there is one sin that I have struggled with all of my life, it is the sin of fear. That is, fear is what has most often separated me from God. I’m not talking about the good kind of fear – that is, a healthy respect and awe for God’s immense power. Rather, I’m talking about the bad kind of fear – a fear, as John puts it, that is grounded in punishment. A kind of fear that is based in hellfire and eternal torture. A kind of fear that poisons the lives of queer people everywhere, and for which love is the only antidote.

If you think about it, the opposite of love is not hate. It’s fear. Fear clouds our judgment and prevents us from seeing clearly and acting with love. It’s no accident that homophobia literally means the “fear of homosexuals.” *Phobos* is the Greek word for fear, and it is the same word that John uses for fear in tonight’s scripture reading. Fear, including homophobia, prevents us from loving fully, and it prevents us from fully abiding in God. It’s no accident that Professor Rose Wu’s groundbreaking book on sexual minorities and the Hong Kong church is called *Liberating the Church from Fear*.

Have you noticed how much of Christian theology is grounded in fear and punishment? According to the standard atonement theory in Western Christianity, Jesus Christ died in order to save us from being punished by God for our original sin. That is, God sent Jesus to take on the eternal punishment that we inherited from our first parents, Adam and Eve, as a result of their disobedience in the Garden of Eden. To me, this is not a theology of love. It is ultimately a theology that is grounded in fear and punishment.

Although I grew up loving the church and wanting to become a priest, I ran away from the church out of fear when I realized that I was gay. I believed the church when it said that I was intrinsically disordered and that I was destined for hell. Growing up in a first-generation Asian American immigrant household didn’t help things either.

The neo-Confucian values of my parents resulted in another layer of fear – a fear of shaming or letting down my family because of my homosexuality. The first thing my Mom said to me when I came out to her nearly twenty-five years ago was “Don’t tell your father or grandmother; they may have a heart attack and die.” The second thing she said was “What will our family and friends think?” My mother was also gripped by fear.

This combination of Catholic theology and neo-Confucian values led me to run away from my true calling to be a pastor and a theologian. After college, I went to law school, because it was right thing for the oldest son of Chinese immigrants to do. I practiced law for nearly twenty years before I had the courage to finish my Ph.D. in systematic theology, leave the practice of law, and become a full-time seminary professor.

What if, instead of grounding our theologies in a place of fear and punishment, we started from a place of love? What if, instead of viewing Jesus Christ as taking on the death penalty for our original sin, we understood the incarnation as God's loving attempt to set things back on the right path after Adam and Eve messed up? That is, what would it mean if we understood Jesus as a "rebooting" or a "version 2.0" of humanity in computer terms?

This understanding of the atonement as "Humanity 2.0" is actually much older than the substitution or penal satisfaction models that were formulated in the Middle Ages and the Reformation. The ancient idea of Jesus as a new head of humanity, or recapitulation, can still be seen in Eastern Orthodox traditions today. And I believe that we queer Christians need to take this theology more seriously if we are to move from a place of fear to love.

For me, it was the embodied love of Jesus Christ – as embodied in my husband Michael and in the bodies of my queer siblings everywhere – that showed me the way back to God. Jesus has been like a GPS that leads me back home, to the ultimate destination of God's love. It was queer love, and not the fear of punishment, that opened my heart, mind, and soul to the love of God – and to the amazing way in which grace has worked in my life.

This grace has even worked wonders in my mother's life. In recent years, she has become an activist for LGBT rights. Can you believe it? My mother is a queer rights activist. She has spoken at a press conference with the Chinese American press, and she has filmed public service announcements that call upon Asian parents to accept their LGBT children. Last summer, she was invited to the White House in Washington D.C. along with other queer rights activists. The very same God who lifted up leaders from "unconventional" or "queer" families – including Hagar, Sarah, and Abraham; Miriam and Moses; Ruth and Naomi; David and Jonathan; and Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Jesus – has also called my Mom! Can I hear an Amen?

Indeed, I believe that those of us who are queer Christians have a very special calling from God – a calling to help others move from a place of fear to a place of love. Perfect love casts out fear. *Ai jì wánquán , jiù bǎ jùpà chū qù.*

\* \* \*

I want to conclude with some thoughts about queer, or rainbow, ethics. That is, how should we live in the world as disciples of God's radical love? As John teaches us in

tonight's scripture text, if we do not love our brothers and sisters whom we can see, how can we possibly love a God whom we cannot see? *Bú ài tā suǒ kànjian de dìxiōng, jiù bùnéng ài méiyǒu kànjian de shén.*

So how are we to act in the world? John writes that those who say they love God but who hate their brothers and sisters are liars. I wonder if he might be talking about certain Christians – like the Evangelical Free Church of China Yan Fook, which organized the massive anti-gay “prayer concert” and rally in Hong Kong this past January. These Christians say they love God, but refuse to love their LGBT sisters and brothers by supporting civil anti-discrimination laws. If they cannot love the queer siblings whom they see before them, how can they love an invisible God?

But before we become too confident in our own righteousness (which is the real sin that Paul was condemning in the first chapter of Romans), I believe that the First Letter of John requires us to ask ourselves whether we are in fact loving all of the sisters and brothers in our own community. Are we in fact acting with the same kind of radical love that Jesus did?

Dear siblings in Christ, are we loving those people in the LGBT community who do not fit the accepted standards of youth, beauty, wealth, and education? Or are we excluding those people who are too old, not attractive enough, not economically well-off, or not educated enough? Do we stigmatize those who are marginalized in the LGBT community, such as transgender or intersex people, people with HIV/AIDS, or people with disabilities? Are we fully inclusive of lesbians and bisexual women?

How do we treat those people who are on the sexual margins, such as sex workers, people in the BDSM and kink communities, or people in nonconventional relationships? Can we see God's radical love at work not just in our churches, but also in our bars, dance clubs, and saunas? This may be difficult for some of you to hear – and perhaps “step on your toes,” as Cindi mentioned yesterday afternoon – but there is still much work to be done before the Reign of God is fully realized.

To conclude, let us never forget the lessons of the First Letter of John about love. First: God is love – God is present whenever and wherever there is queer love. Second: Love has been perfected among us. In particular, love has been perfected in the radical love of Jesus Christ. And third: Perfect love casts out fear. The opposite of love is not hate, but fear.

Let us say these three lessons together one last time. First: God is love. *Shén jiù shì ài.* Second: Love has been perfected among us. *Ài zài wǒmen lǐmiàn déyǐ wánquán.* And third: Perfect love casts out fear. *Ài jì wánquán , jiù bǎ jùpà chú qù.* And let us always remember that we queer Christians have a special calling from God to bring others from a place of fear to a place of radical love, just as Jesus Christ did in his ministry.



Dear siblings in Christ, each and every one of YOU has a special calling from God to bring others from fear to love. For that, we give thanks to God, from whom all blessings flow. Amen.

*Let us pray. Holy God, we thank you for being love itself, and we thank you for perfecting love in the flesh in Jesus Christ. May we always remember that perfect love casts out fear, and that we are called as your LGBT and queer children to a special ministry of bringing others from a place of fear to a place of love. All this we ask in your Holy Name, Jesus the Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.*

Before we close this service tonight, I invite you to recommit yourself to a ministry of radical love that casts out fear. I invite you to come up and receive an anointing and commissioning for this ministry, so that you can in turn pass it on to others. So stand up – and come up on either set of front steps – if you feel that God is calling you to bring people from a place of fear to a place of love.