

2 Kings 9:30-37
Revelation 19:11-16

Faithful and True

The Rev. Patrick S. Cheng*
Metropolitan Community Church of Washington, D.C.
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Good morning! I'm delighted to be here this morning at MCC/DC to celebrate Pentecost and Asian Heritage Month with you. What a blessing it is to be in such a beautiful space and to be part of such a beautiful service. I want to thank Pastor Candace, Rev. Phil, all the members of the People of Color Outreach ministry committee, the choir, the musicians, and Kevin Lee for making this celebration a reality. I think they all deserve a big hand.

As many of you may know, the Board of Elders of MCC has designated the month of May as Asian Heritage Month. It's a time for congregations to recognize the presence and contributions of Asian people throughout the Fellowship, both in the United States and throughout the world. How appropriate that today is also Pentecost Sunday, when the Spirit of God was poured out upon the Twelve and empowered them to speak in the native languages and tongues of all who were listening!

For over a billion people of Asian descent, today not only falls within Year 2002 according to the western Gregorian calendar, but it also falls within the Year of the Horse in the eastern lunar calendar. The lunar calendar, recognized by many of our Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese and Tibetan sisters and brothers, is divided into cycles of twelve years. Each year is named after one of the twelve faithful animals that, legend has it, came to bid the Buddha farewell before he departed from the earth.

So, this year is the Year of the Horse, and this is your year if you were born in 2002, 1990, 1978, 1966, 1954, 1942, 1930, and so on. Are there any horses out there? According to the Chinese Zodiac, people born in the Year of the Horse are amazingly hard working and very independent. They are intelligent, friendly and strong communicators. Some famous horses include James Dean, Ella Fitzgerald, Aretha Franklin, and Nelson Mandela.

Anyway, when I was asked to be here today, I thought that this would be a great chance for me to honor my Asian heritage -- and the cultural diversity symbolized by Pentecost Sunday -- and preach about horses. But then, I wondered how in the world I would preach about horses in the context of a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and

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queer-straight church. I mean, it would be one thing if I were at MCC Great Falls, Montana, but I'm at MCC/DC, where horses are far and few between. (I guess there are donkeys and elephants in the Capital City, but not a lot of horses.)

What, I wondered, did horses have to do with queer people? I prayed and prayed for inspiration. Just as I was beginning to despair, however, I got a sign from above. Not quite the blowing of violent winds or the descent of tongues of fire, but a wonderful and marvelous sign nonetheless. As I was surfing on the internet, I discovered that Barbara Streisand was born in the Year of the Horse. Now, if Barbara Streisand isn't a sign from God that I was meant to preach on horses this morning, I don't know what is!

Seriously, however, I'd like to explore with you today how horses are portrayed in the Bible, and how we, as God's beloved children, might read the symbol of the horse as God's message for us to be "faithful and true."

Will you pray with me?

Holy and loving God, we give you thanks for gathering us here today, on Pentecost Sunday and during this celebration of Asian Heritage Month. We give you thanks for the chance to encounter your Word and your Spirit in this sanctuary that is our spiritual Home. Help us to be faithful and true to you -- and to ourselves -- as we seek to do your will, wherever we may be. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O God, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

In the Bible, horses are associated with warfare and God's favor upon those who are faithful and true. For example, in the Book of First Kings, horses symbolize King Solomon's faithfulness and divinely-favored status; his stables could hold as many as 40,000 horses! By contrast, in the Book of Exodus, Moses and Miriam sing about how the unfaithful Egyptians are punished by having their horses and soldiers drowned in the waters of the Red Sea after it was parted for the Israelites.

This association between horses and faithfulness can be seen in today's first reading about the death of Jezebel, who was thrown out of her window by royal eunuchs and trampled to death by horses. Jezebel was one the most powerful women in history, and I'm not just talking about the Bette Davis movie. She was queen of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and served as the high priestess of the cult of Baal, the Phoenician god of fertility and rain. The Bible tells us that she presided over 850 priests! (Kind of like Madonna on stage with her dancers, if you've ever seen one of her concerts.) Because Jezebel did not worship Yahweh exclusively, however, the Bible wipes her out, both literally and figuratively. Nothing is left of her, except for her skull, her feet, and her palms. Even to this day, "Jezebel" is used as a derogatory term to describe women, especially women of color, who are unfaithful or who do not conform with the sexual norms of society.

The association between horses and faithfulness is also seen in today's second reading from the Book of Revelation. In that reading, the rider -- named "Faithful and

True” -- comes out of the heavens riding a white horse. He is followed by the armies of heaven, also riding on white horses, and he comes to judge the unfaithful at the end of time. The rider is described in frightening terms: his eyes are like flames of fire, and a sharp sword comes out of his mouth to strike down the nations. He will rule over the unfaithful with a rod of iron and tread the winepress of the fury of God. Throughout the history of the church, this passage has been seen as the return of Christ at the end of time to judge the living and the dead.

Now, I don't know if these readings make you a bit uncomfortable, but they certainly do for me. It might be my recovering Catholic side, but God comes across a lot like a junior high school bully: Gimme your lunch money, or I'll beat you up. Worship only me, or pay the consequences. Tonight's readings are a sobering reminder of the violent nature of many stories that appear in the Bible, particularly against people who are viewed as not being faithful or true to God, including powerful women, queer people, and people who worship other deities.

Professor Kwok Pui-Lan, an Asian American feminist theologian at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has shown how many of the texts in the Bible that condemn homosexuality are deeply intertwined with notions of unfaithfulness to God. For example, the condemnation of same-sex acts between men in the Book of Leviticus is followed immediately by the condemnation of child sacrifices to Molech, the Canaanite god of fire. Similarly, in his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul argues that same-sex acts, both male and female, are a direct result of the “unnatural” worshiping of idols of birds, beasts, and reptiles.

What should we, as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer-straight people of faith, do with these “horse” texts, when we ourselves are condemned by the Christian right -- by Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and the like -- as modern-day Jezebels and pagans who will be subjected to the wrath of God at the end of time? How should we interpret these violent texts, when innocent people like Matthew Shepard and J.R. Warren are trampled and beaten to death by queer bashers and homophobes? In this age of religiously-justified terrorism, can we afford to perpetuate the cycle of violence by condemning our Asian sisters and brothers around the world who are of the Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, or Muslim faiths?

I'd like to suggest this morning that we, as queer people of faith, should read these “horse” texts not so much as directions for spiritual warfare or blind allegiance to certain religious beliefs and practices, but rather about being “faithful and true” to who God has created us to be. Sort of like the trusty old steed in Westerns who is always faithful and true to the hero, no matter how bad things might get.

As people of faith, we are called to look to Jesus' example of being faithful and true to God's call, even if there is a price to be paid for that discipleship. Scholars have pointed out that it's no coincidence that Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey and *not* a horse, the traditional symbol of royal power and conquest. Jesus teaches us in the gospels to love our neighbors as ourselves, and it's this unconditional love that liberates

us from the need to persecute or dominate others who are different than us, sexually, ethnically, or spiritually.

Indeed, contemporary theologians have started to rethink traditional Christian notions of exclusivity with respect to people of other faiths. Those of us who are Asian Americans have often experienced first-hand the pain of Christian exclusivity. Unlike our African-Americans and Latino siblings of color, many of us do not grow up in exclusively Christian households. For example, I grew up living with my maternal grandparents, who were two of the most loving people I ever knew. When they died, however, both of them were refused Christian burials -- and our parish priests even refused to show up at their funerals -- simply because they were not baptized Christians.

Many theologians are now talking about pluralism and interfaith dialogue, a process by which we Christians can share a common path with our non-Christian siblings to liberate others from suffering and pain, but yet remain faithful and true to our own religious identities as followers of Jesus Christ. I had the privilege of leading a workshop on "Queer World Spiritualities" at the church yesterday afternoon, and many of us wrestled deeply with being open to spiritual traditions that are different than our own, and yet being faithful and true to God's call for us.

Being faithful and true to God's call is particularly a challenge for those of us who are queer, Asian and Christian. So much of our lives is spent trying to reconcile the fragmented parts of ourselves. It's like you can never be all three at once.

For example, you can be gay, but you can't be Asian or Christian. Even though I am an openly gay man, as an Asian American I'm often faced with exclusion and erasure from our community's predominantly white leadership and media. Less than two months ago, the Washington Blade published in its "Need Wood?" advice column an incredibly offensive article that described the "social pecking order" within the gay community in this order: white, Latino, African-American, and finally Asian. According to Woody, "[t]he best way to get brown is to turn blond." Fortunately, a number of queer Asian groups in the area, including AQUA, wrote a powerful response, insisting that the gay community "stop perpetuating the notion that whites are inherently superior, better and more desirable." Nevertheless, this is just one example of how hard it is to be gay and Asian. As a gay person, I also struggle with my community's hostility against my religious identity. As a Christian, I am often viewed with suspicion by the community. I'm sure each and every one of you know what I'm taking about -- often it's a lot easier to talk about what (or who) we do at the Crew Club on Saturday night than what we do at church on Sunday morning!

Or you can be Asian, but you can't be gay or Christian. Even though I'm part of a larger Asian-American community, I often struggle with issues of homophobia within that community and with my family of origin. When I first came out to my mom in college, I remember that she made me swear not to tell our other family members or our family's friends, lest I dishonor my family. Over a decade later, she and my partner Michael's mom are good friends and they even talk on phone to learn the latest gossip

about us. But it's taken a long time -- and a lot of hard work -- to get to this point, and some of my Asian friends never do. As an Asian American, I also struggle with conflict between my Christian values and my community's Confucian values. There's a great book called "Following Jesus without Dishonoring Your Parents," which talks about how younger Asian-American Christians often clash with their parents and elders over issues of authority and what's most important in life. (No Dad, I don't want to go to Med School. I want to go to seminary.)

Finally, you can be Christian, but you can't be Asian or gay. Even though I am an ordained Christian minister, I still face issues of racism within predominantly white churches, who refuse to see racial reconciliation as a theological issue. Most churches conveniently gloss over centuries of biblical interpretation in which the slavery passages of the Bible were used to justify the ownership of people by other people -- including African Americans and Asian American indentured servants in the sugar cane plantations of Hawaii and on the 19th century transcontinental railroads. As a Christian, I also struggle with homophobia from mainline institutions. It doesn't matter what gifts I might bring to the table. I still can't be ordained in most denominations -- Catholic, Protestant or Eastern Orthodox -- simply because I happen to be in an eleven-year relationship with another man.

For me, finding God has been finding a community of other queer Asian Christians in which I can be totally faithful and true to who God has created me to be. Over the last few years, nearly one hundred of us around the world, including Kevin Lee, have come together in cyberspace to form the MCC Queer Asian Fellowship, an email list in which we share our prayers, hopes and dreams. If any of you are interested in being part of this virtual community -- whether or not you are of Asian descent -- I invite you to talk to Kevin or me after the service so that you can be added to the list. I've also found God in celebrations like this one, in which we queer Asian Christians don't have to compromise with respect to our sexualities, our ethnicities, or our spiritualities.

You don't have to be a queer Asian Christian to understand how hard it is to be faithful and true while living in multiple worlds. The very fact that you're here at MCC/DC this morning means that you've found a sanctuary that allows you to be faithful and true to who God has created you to be.

In the end, I believe that we lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer-straight people of faith are called to rethink the horse passages in the Bible. We are called to read the Jezebel story not so much as wiping out people of different faiths, but rather as stomping out the idols and false gods in our lives that prevent us from being faithful and true to who God has created us to be. And we are called to read the white horse passage from Revelation not so much as a condemnation of non-Christians, but as God's promise of victory over the internalized homophobia, self-hatred, and insecurities that prevent us from being faithful and true to ourselves.

May you resolve during this Pentecost and this Asian Heritage Month to be faithful and true to who God has called you to be. It doesn't matter if that means coming

out to your family and coworkers, practicing spiritual exercises such as meditation, yoga, *Tai Chi*, or tantric sex, fighting for the right to marry, or attending the Asians and Pacific Islanders OUT Loud event next Saturday night in Columbia Heights. God loves you just the way you are. In the words of a traditional Chinese saying: *Ma Dao Tseng Gong*, or “May everything run like a horse for you!” Run like a horse in the knowledge that God has anointed you faithful and true.

Amen.