

## In the Spotlight

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Metropolitan Community Church of Hartford  
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Good morning! It's great to be here at MCC Hartford today. I wanted to express my gratitude to Pastors George and Julio for inviting me to preach, and I also wanted to thank all of you for your welcoming hospitality.

What a festive day it is! Not only is it Transfiguration Sunday -- the last Sunday of the Epiphany season and the last Sunday before the beginning of Lent -- but it's also Valentine's Day, Presidents' Day weekend, African American Heritage Month, and the start of the Winter Olympics. Wow! Did I miss anything?

Oh, right -- today is the first day of the Lunar New Year, and that's why I'm here. For over a billion people in Asia and around the world, this is a special time to reconnect with friends and family. It seems appropriate that I'm able to reconnect with so many of you after a few years of being away.

As you may know, each year in the Lunar calendar is assigned one of twelve animals. This year happens to be the Year of the Tiger. It's your year if you were born in 2010, 1998, 1986, 1974, 1962, 1950, 1938, and 1926. Are there any tigers here? Some famous tigers include Jodi Foster, Alanis Morissette, Sheryl Crow, Tom Cruise, Jay Leno, Jon Stewart, Marilyn Monroe, and Queen Elizabeth II. So you are in good company if you are a tiger. Let's give the tigers in the congregation a big hand!

The title of my sermon is "In the Spotlight." In today's gospel reading, we see that Jesus is thrust "into the spotlight," both figuratively and literally. Jesus goes up a mountain with three of his closest disciples to pray. While he is there, Jesus is transfigured. His face changes, and his clothes become dazzling white. He speaks with Moses and Elijah. And he is surrounded by a cloud as God proclaims him as God's child, the chosen one. Not only is Jesus the center of attention, but he's on center stage with a spotlight shining directly at him.

For most of us, it's not a big leap to see Jesus "in the spotlight" like that. In fact, most of us probably expect Jesus to be the center of attention. Not only is Jesus the center of attention for Peter, John, James, Moses, and Elijah (and even God!) in today's gospel, but Jesus is also the focal point for us. After all, for those of us who walk the Christian path, our liturgical year centers around the birth, life, death, and resurrection of

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Jesus the Anointed One. We are taught from an early age that Jesus is the one who is always “in the spotlight.”

But what *can* often be a big leap for us, however, is imagining *ourselves* to be in the spotlight. Many of us who are LGBT have grown up thinking that we are broken or unworthy of God’s love. How many of us have been teased and taunted for expressing who we are? Or how many of us have been afraid to reveal ourselves fully and risk rejection from our families, friends, and church communities? As such, we learn from an early age to hide in the shadows, whether it’s the closet or our feelings of self-doubt or shame. It’s fine for others to be in the spotlight, but not us.

Indeed, as many feminist theologians have argued, sin for many of us is not false pride or lifting ourselves up too high, as Augustine had argued in the fifth century. Rather, sin for many of us is hiding from others and not lifting ourselves high enough. How many times have we thought “I’m not good enough to do that” or “I’m not worthy enough to ask for that”? Or maybe we think that we *are* good enough or worthy enough, but it’s just not worth the effort when the odds seem so heavily stacked against us.

That’s why coming out -- whether as an LGBT person or an ally -- is such an important moment of grace for many of us. That’s why celebrating Pride is such an important “holy day” for those of us who are queer-identified. Whenever we are blessed with the courage to step “into the spotlight,” just as Jesus did when he was transfigured on the mountain top, we experience the grace of God’s overflowing love for us.

Of course, coming out is never an easy thing to do, nor is it a one-time event. Even those of us who have been out for decades are always coming out to others in new contexts. It can be incredibly difficult to put our economic well-being or even physical safety at risk, time and time again. That’s why Jesus’ transfiguration or moment “in the spotlight” is not just a matter of triumphalism or being fabulous; it is also a somber turning point that leads us to Ash Wednesday, Lent, and the cross of Good Friday.

Next Sunday, there will be a historic “first” in New York City. For the first time ever, the Chinatown Lunar New Year parade will have an openly LGBT contingent marching in it. The theme for those of us marching is “family,” and there will be lots and lots of rainbow-colored banners and streamers! This is an especially big deal, since LGBT people have been banned from other ethnic parades in New York City, such as the St. Patrick’s Day parade as well as the India Day parade.

Two weekends ago, my mom -- who is nearly 70 and who has never really spoken in public about queer issues -- decided to step “in the spotlight” herself. She agreed to speak at a press conference in Chinatown about the importance of having an queer presence in the Lunar New Year parade. In particular, she spoke about what it’s like to be a parent of an openly gay son and urged other Asian Americans not to discriminate against LGBT people.

My mom has received an amazing amount of news coverage for her statement. She appeared in the three major Chinese-American newspapers, as well as in the NYC Gay City News. A video of her speech has been posted to YouTube, and pictures of her are all over Facebook and the internet. She certainly stepped “in the spotlight” in a big way!

For me, the press conference was a real moment of grace. I don’t think I could ever have imagined twenty years ago, when I first came out to my mom as a senior in college at Yale, that she would be willing to speak out so powerfully for truth and out of love. All she was able to say back then was that I shouldn’t come out to my father or grandmother because they might get a heart attack from the news. If my mom’s journey from fear to love isn’t an example of the Holy Spirit working to transform our lives, I don’t know what is.

For me, the message of Transfiguration Sunday is that, like Jesus, we are ALL called by God to step “into the spotlight.” Epiphany is a liturgical season that is all about showing and revealing, and we are called to model ourselves on Jesus, who is the flesh-and-blood revelation of God’s embodied love for us.

Stepping “into the spotlight” doesn’t have to involve something as dramatic as speaking at a press conference. It can take the form of coming out to someone new, speaking out against homophobia or heterosexism wherever you encounter it, or marching in a pride parade. It may not be easy, but I do believe that we experience God’s overflowing grace and love most fully whenever we step “into the spotlight” and out of our closets, shadows, self-doubts, and shame.

So please keep us in your prayers next Sunday as we celebrate Lunar New Year for All in Chinatown. Many of those marching will be stepping “into the spotlight” for the very first time. May the love of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit be with each of you as you step “in the spotlight,” wherever God calls you to be in the coming year. Happy Year of the Tiger!