

Unclean Spirits

By the Rev. Patrick S. Cheng

This article is an edited version of a sermon that Reverend Cheng gave at the Metropolitan Community Church of Hartford on January 29, 2006. The sermon is based on Deuteronomy 18:15-20 and Mark 1:21-28 in the Christian Bible.

I've been preaching on the Chinese New Year for a number of years now from the perspective of an openly gay Asian American minister, and I've noticed that we're going through a pretty interesting three-year cycle. Last year was the Year of the Cock, which I thought was particularly appropriate for gay men, for obvious reasons.

This year is the Year of the Dog, which, again, I think is appropriate for gay men, since we all know that men are dogs. Am I wrong? We men are loyal companions, but we'll hump a good-looking leg or fire hydrant the first chance we get. And next year will be the Year of the Pig. Need I say more? I can't wait to write that sermon. Who says the Lunar calendar isn't queer?

Seriously, this is your year if you were born in 1994, 1982, 1970, 1958, 1946, or 1934. People born in this year have a giving, compassionate personality who offer kind words of support and advice to their families and friends. Famous dogs include Bill Clinton and Jennifer Lopez, so you are in good company.

One of my best memories of growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area was watching the Chinese New Year parade. Our family would go to Chinatown at night and watch the parade make its way down Grant Avenue. We

would munch on candied coconut strips and other sweet snacks while watching the giant dragon, the firecrackers, and the lion dancers, all of which were intended to ward off evil spirits for the coming year.

Legend has it that the Chinese New Year festival was founded thousands of years ago by a village that was terrorized by an evil spirit that just wouldn't leave. The villagers discovered that the spirit was afraid of loud noises, bright lights, and the color red. So they banged their drums and gongs, burned bamboo sticks that crackled like firecrackers, and hung up red lanterns throughout the village. As a result, the villagers triumphed, and the tradition stuck!

In the gospel reading, we encounter a similar story about Jesus chasing away an evil spirit that just won't leave. Jesus sees a person in the synagogue who is possessed by an "unclean spirit" (which basically means demon or evil spirit in the Greek). The demon resists Jesus when it meets him. It pushes Jesus away by crying out "What do you have to do with us . . . Have you come to destroy us?" Jesus, full of authority, orders it to be silent and to leave the possessed person. The spirit is forced to obey, convulsing the person and crying out with a loud voice. Like the Chinese villagers with the gongs and drums, bamboo sticks, and red lanterns, Jesus scares away the spirit and tri-

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umphs in the end.

Clearly this is an important story for the author of the second gospel. In fact, this is the very first action that Jesus performs in Mark’s gospel after the calling of his disciples. The exorcism confirms that Jesus is the “one having authority” from God and is not just a mere interpreter of scripture, as the scribes were (or us preachers for that matter). It establishes Jesus as the authentic bearer of God’s word, as we hear in the first reading from Deuteronomy.

What does this mean for us today, as LGBT people in the 21st century who are well educated and don’t believe in silly things like evil spirits and exorcisms? Let’s face it, most of us look down on these kinds of stories. We believe in a rational, scientific universe, one in which evil spirits and demons don’t exist. Even if we do believe in these forces, we are unlikely to talk about them for fear of others making fun of us.

Furthermore, a lot of us have been hurt or damaged by talk of evil or unclean spirits. It brings up uncomfortable images of hypocritical ex-gay ministries and televangelists who claim that we just need to turn to Jesus, and we will be made straight. Well, I don’t know about you, but I’ve been turning to Jesus for a pretty long time, and I’m still queer as a three dollar bill! So how do we make sense of the gospel?

For one thing, today’s reading is actually a very queer text. In it, Jesus is seen as a shaman, a spiritual leader who has powers to heal others by communicating with the Spirit world. Throughout history, a strong connection has existed between shamanism and queer or gender variant people. This is because shamans, like queer people, have particular talents for crossing multiple worlds and boundaries,

whether it’s the boundary between the male and female worlds, or the boundary between the human and spirit worlds.

The Native American tradition, for example, has embraced and honored the tradition of queer shamans. They are called “Two Spirit” people because they bring together male and female as well as body and spirit. There are East Asian shamans as well. The patron saint of queer people in China is Qu Yuan, who was a famous poet and gay shaman who brought together the masculine and feminine energies of yin and yang.

But, more importantly, I think that today’s gospel about Jesus and the unclean spirit speaks deeply to those of us as LGBT people of faith. We may think that we no longer have any issues once we’ve come out of the closet, but in fact that’s just the beginning of the healing process. The truth is that many of us are still possessed by unclean spirits, even if we are openly and proudly queer. What are some of our modern-day demons?

- Self-Hate. We continue to suffer from self-hatred about the fact that we are gender variant or love people of the same sex. We reject the gift of queerness that God has bestowed upon us, a gift that shows the world how truly unlimited and promiscuous God’s love can be.
- Shame. We harbor shame with respect to our bodies and sexualities in all of their amazing diversity. We fail to see that we are called to celebrate flesh, for through the incarnation God, too, became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.
- Doubt. We doubt that God has given each of us spiritual gifts and talents and the ability

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to access the spiritual truth ourselves. We are reluctant to embrace God through multiple spiritual paths -- whether Christian, Buddhist, or Wicca.

- Fear. We are afraid of claiming our rightful position as beloved children of God. We are terrified of God's judgment, when what we need the most is to be merciful to ourselves.

These unclean spirits of self-hate, shame, doubt, and fear hold us back from the full potential that God has intended for us even before we were born. We are sometimes so possessed by these spirits that we resist the radically healing love of Jesus Christ, even when we encounter it face to face.

In fact, like the person who was possessed by the unclean spirit, we often resist this love when we need it the most. I know this in my own life with Michael. Often when I feel the most vulnerable or exposed, I will end up pushing him away, when what I need the most is a big hug.

My challenge to you, as we enter the Year of the Dog, is to reflect on what demons you might bring into this gathering place. What is your reaction when you come face to face with the radically healing love of Jesus Christ, a love that heals all self-hate, shame, doubt, and fear? Do you resist it? Do you challenge it by crying out "What have you to do with us Have you come to destroy us"? Or do you simply surrender, open yourself up to healing, and make yourself available for a great big hug?

It might not be your style to celebrate the Chinese New Year by beating drums and gongs, lighting firecrackers, or decorating your windows and doors with red lanterns. But you can certainly celebrate the Good News, right here and right now, by making a joyous noise in praise of God, by setting off the radically healing love of Jesus Christ, and by allowing the red flames of the Holy Spirit to touch your hearts. Happy New Year! Amen.