

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Queer Theology”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore January 24,2021

Reading

From *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* by Patrick S. Cheng

When I met and fell in love with my husband, Michael, almost two decades ago, something radical happened. I experienced the boundaries between myself and the outside world dissolving in a way that I had never experienced before. The boundaries that had separated me from other people in the past—intellectually, emotionally and physically—became fluid. Michael and I were no longer two separate and distinct persons, but rather two connected human beings with permeable borders.

Other boundaries within me dissolved as well. For example, the boundaries that had previously kept the categories of male and female separate and distinct also became fluid. As a gay man in a same-sex relationship, my standard definitions of who a “man” was allowed to fall in love with (that is, traditionally only with a “woman” and not with another “man”) no longer held true.

But most importantly, the boundaries between God and me began to dissolve. My early childhood love for God, which had evaporated in the face of the hatred and intolerance of anti-gay Christians after I realized that I was gay and started to come out of the closet, was rekindled as I understood what it meant to experience *embodied love*. Indeed, we know that God is love—a love so extreme that it is described in superlative terms such as ploutos (extreme wealth) and hyperperisseuo (superabundance). Not surprisingly, those who love one another deeply have passed through the boundaries between death and life.

Radical love, I contend, is a love so extreme that it dissolves our existing boundaries, whether they are boundaries that separate us from other people, that separate us from preconceived notions of sexuality and gender identity, or that separate us from God...The connections between Christian theology and queer theology *are actually* much closer than one would think. That is, radical love lies *at the heart* of both Christian theology and queer theology.

Spoken Meditation

Humanity's Psalm By [Cynthia Frado](#)

Creator of Life, Source of All Being

It was from the particles of the Universe that you formed me...

Iron and carbon and phosphorous

Mixed with energy, passion and dreams.

I was made in your image, says ancient Scripture.

Made from the colors of the rainbow,

Shaped with bones straight and curved,

Padded with flesh flabby and lean,

Near-sighted, far-sighted, short-sighted, and long in vision.

I was made in your image, says ancient Scripture.
 Made strong and tall, short and stout,
 Born with hands tender and fragile,
 Aged with hands gnarled and mature.
 Large nose, small nose, crooked nose
 Who knows the mathematical infinitude of your genetic possibilities?

I was made in your image, says ancient Scripture.
 Made to give love and receive love.
 Your passion courses through my veins.
 And when I touch another human being in love,
 It matters not what gender ignites the flame,
 It matters only that the fire of life brings its light to the
 darkened deadness of a world that cannot exist
 without love's transformative power.

I was made in your image, says ancient Scripture.
 But who are you?
 I need to know.
 I who have eyes that are brown and blue and green and hazel.
 I who am intellectually gifted and mentally challenged.
 I who speak the languages of the world and no language at all.
 I who know scientific equations and musical sonatas,
 and know only the magic of a daily loaf of bread,
 and the taunting sounds of racism,
 and the mockery of my sexual orientation,
 and the lack of respect for my aging body.
 I who am all of these things and more want to know:
 Who are you that I am made in your image?

I am, says ancient Scripture.
 I simply am.
 I am the Light of All-Being,
 I am the Divine Spark.
 I am the Source of Love,
 The most *transformative* power
 In the Universe.
 All life is in my image.
 I am in You,
 And you are in me.
 I am in your siblings.
 They, too, are in me.
 I am in your pain and suffering,
 And I am in your compassion and joy.
 I am Light and Love,

And Hope and Possibility...

And so are you.

Creator of All Life, Source of All Being

It was from the particles of the Universe that you formed me...

Iron and carbon and phosphorous

Mixed with energy, passion and dreams.

Forgive me. Forgive me.

I forgot that you are everywhere.

I forgot that I am everywhere.

Thank you for reminding me of who I am.

Amen.

Sermon

I was quite young the first time I was called “big ears.” I hadn’t noticed my ears were much different from other children’s ears. When I did inspect them, I noticed they were more prominent than other people’s. Not like the Ferengi on Star Trek thankfully but still they did stick out. Today I’m grateful they do because I probably hear better than a lot of folks my age. But back then, it made me appear different from other kids. And I had the very unpleasant experience of being different and not fitting in.

Many if not all of us experience some version of this not fitting in. This is especially true for UUs who don’t fit into our predominantly Christian culture. Whether it is for a superficial difference in appearance, or the way we move, or talk, or act, or think, or believe, not fitting in and being like everyone else can be very painful. Children pass through a developmental stage where they focus on who is one of us and who isn’t – a proto-tribalism. Even the kids who do fit in fear not fitting in.

This is especially difficult for kids who do not identify with their gender assignment or experience attraction that diverges from the heterosexual social norms. Being called “big ears” and “Frankenstein Junior” was emotionally hurtful but it wasn’t potentially dangerous the way being called “queer” was when I was growing up.

The social rejection of non-heterosexual, gender non-binary folks is deeply rooted in the development of Christianity over the last 2,000 years. Christian, and especially St. Augustine’s, ambivalence about sexuality has caused enormous harm and death. I could spend the rest of my sermon outlining the historical development of that harm. Let’s just take it for granted that many Christians still hold the view that it is a sin. And they would hold that view on scant evidence from a few “texts of terror” in the Bible that are mistranslated, misquoted, and mis-understood. Bishop John Shelby Spong, along with other Biblical scholars, have done excellent research to refute their use. Here is what he says in his 1988 book: *Living in Sin: A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality*:

Even if one is a biblical literalist, the biblical references **do not** build an ironclad case for condemnation. If one is not a biblical literalist there is ***no case at all***, nothing but the ever-present prejudice born out of a pervasive ignorance that attacks people whose only crime is to be born with an unchangeable sexual predisposition toward those of their own sex...we must be willing to relinquish our prejudice and the prejudice of Holy Scripture and turn our attention to loving our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, supporting them, and relating to them as a part of God's good creation.

Tearing down these texts as barriers to inclusion has opened the door for gay and lesbian theologians to read the Bible in a new way, a way friendly to their existence. And when the texts are read that way, especially considering Jesus of Nazareth through a queer eye, you get a different reading of scripture. Not ***just*** different, radically different.

This self-identified new queer theology started emerging in the 1950's. The contemporary author I've used for today's reading is the Rev. Patrick Cheng who is an Episcopal priest. In his book, he surveys the diverse thought and theological exploration that I find innovative, interesting and inspiring. Interpreting scripture through a non-binary, non-heterosexual lens lends new meanings that amplify aspects of the text that I think are also friendly to Unitarian Universalism. I'll be interested in your conversational response.

Two visions of God are quite clearly outlined in both the Jewish and Christian scriptures. One is a tribal, rule oriented, punitive, control freak who offers favor to the Jewish people if they keep their covenant. The other, exemplified in Jesus, is a prophetic spirit of universal love interested in redeeming all people. Cheng and other queer theologians find in ***that image*** of God the source of radical love that prefigures all love and dissolves boundaries of separation with humanity. Love transcends tribal covenant.

Jesus was a Jew. His critique of the Pharisees and Temple worship of his time was from the inside, pointing to a love ethic developing through the Jewish prophetic tradition. And he was also stepping beyond his rabbinical peers. He was willing to engage in work on the Sabbath and pick grain. He intervened in the stoning of the adulterous woman. He said it mattered far more what came out of one's mouth than what went into the mouth. One's intentions matter more than the conformity to the law. Sin had to do with what was in one's head that violated the law of the heart.

By extension, queer theologians interpret Jesus' teaching this way: to refuse to recognize the true nature of one's love and attraction because of fear of being socially unacceptable ***is sinful***. To come out of the closet and honor the truth of one's heart's orientation and desire is publicly acknowledging the gift of God's grace. One's gender identity and sexual orientation do not come from a willful personal choice. They come from honoring what God has placed in your heart. Isn't that remarkably different from conservative Christian teaching? It sure is! Wow!

One remarkable quality of Jesus everyone can agree about is he was a boundary crosser. He touched and healed the ritually unclean. He had good things to say about the hated Samaritans. He spent time with Roman tax collectors. He ate and drank with those he wasn't supposed to eat and drink with. And very surprising for a man his age, he was unmarried and without children.

This has led to some speculation that Jesus might have been gay or maybe even intersex (given he was the reported result of parthenogenesis, not having a human father). He certainly had both women and men who were devoted to him as followers. The texts are silent about his sexuality which leaves more than enough room for creative interpretation. Some have suggested this might have been on purpose as an extreme form of gender and sexual identity boundary crossing. Or maybe Jesus was intentionally challenging Greek essentialism. Essentialism sees every “thing” as an expression of an essential form. Chairs are examples of the form chair. Tables of the ideal table. A man is the image of male. Could Jesus’ identity of traditional faith as 100% human and 100% God be queering male and female in his non-gendered identity?

Christianity **is built** on the way Jesus dies. St. Paul hardly cares about the life Jesus led, what he did or didn’t do while alive. All that matters to Paul is that he was crucified, died, and was resurrected. He defeated death for all who believe in him.

Crucifixion is a horrible, shameful, embarrassing, and tortuous way to die reserved for heinous criminals and threats to Rome. The crucified die a miserable, painful death and their dead body is left on the cross as an example to others until it is picked clean by vultures, rots and its bones fall to the ground. The goal is to destroy *not only* the body of a person but to erase them from common memory. Rene Girard writes about this process as scapegoating. Putting the sins of the people into a goat then expiating that sin through its sacrifice.

That didn’t happen for Jesus. Whether or not he experienced bodily resurrection, ultimately isn’t as important as the fact that he was not erased from memory. Not only that, but his spirit also lives on to this day.

LGBTQ+ folks can easily identify with Jesus as a scapegoat. They are scapegoats of a sexually dysfunctional patriarchal society that projects its problems on the LGBTQ community by stigmatizing them, harming them and at times killing them. We need only think of Matthew Shepard and the many Black trans folks who die every year scapegoats of homophobic sexual anxiety. Through the resurrection, be it physical and/or spiritual, God says “no” to scapegoating. By parallel, God says “no” to the scapegoating of LGBTQ folks too.

And finally, what does queer theology have to say about heaven, hell and the Last Judgment. Queer folk have been threatened endlessly with hell fire for their supposed sexual crimes. The Catholic Church is quite repressive when it comes to sexuality using this threat. The Church only approves of indulging the powerful desire of the flesh for the purpose of procreation. Otherwise, gentlemen, keep your fly zipped and gentlewomen, keep your legs crossed.

Gay and lesbian theologians haven’t written as much about eschatology, yet there is an urgency to deal with the topic. During the beginning of the AIDS crisis, as gay men were dying excruciatingly miserable deaths, the question of the afterlife was a pressing concern for some. Was this intense suffering foreshadowing divine punishment awaiting me? What kind of a loving God would force me to die this way? I imagine many lost their faith before they lost their lives.

Here is where Cheng goes with it. If God’s true nature is an extreme, radical love that dissolves boundaries, the boundaries of gender and sexual orientation also dissolve with our deaths. The essence of who we are in soul or spirit is not gendered. In a sense we are all transgender in the end.

Taking that process to the extreme, **that** is the nature of radical love, all barriers of separation dissolve, even reward and punishment, heaven and hell. This returning to our original state of oneness with God is called apo-kata-stasis. It has its origin in Zoroastrian thought and belief and was adopted by the Christian theologian Origen. He is one of our sources for Universalism.

Here is where I recognized queer theology connecting strongly with Unitarian Universalism most clearly. In Cheng's writing I hear our reverence for the inherent worth and dignity of every person. That inherent worth is unconditioned by gender identity or sexual orientation. It embraces difference. It honors diversity. It appreciates life's ever changing and evolving creative process.

Unitarian Universalism honors the primacy of love. Our historical foundation has always been love for God and love for neighbor, the Great Commandments. There is no asterisk on neighbor that says there is some preference for straight white males. Love for God doesn't pick a denomination or religious tradition. It grows ever wider in its embrace.

As independent types, we've always been suspicious of and rejected power-over relationships honoring the movement of each person's heart and respecting each person's conscience.

And our eschatology is also firmly universalist. We do not tremble in fear before the pit of hell. Jesus closed that door, if it ever existed in the first place. We are ready to soar in love to join all that we love when the end comes.

So, I encourage us find common cause with queer theology. Let us not fear our differences and uniqueness, let us celebrate them. And may the most noble purpose of our religion be to grow us out of our tribal obsessions that we may find a wider union through love.

May it be so.