

Queerly a Good Friday

Jeanette Mei Gim Lee

As a clergy candidate in the queer Christian denomination, the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, I work to uphold Christian traditions in ways that are responsive to the plurality of backgrounds in our community, as I did this year when commemorating Holy Week. Without having had the influence of institutional religion in my childhood, and having lived the majority of my life in the San Francisco Bay Area, demographically the region with the least amount of regular church attendance in the country, Holy Week is unfamiliar terrain for me. Yet, as a biracial lesbian and self-identified queer who entered ministry in her early twenties, my immersion into the unfamiliar is, paradoxically, familiar.

In seminary, I've been trained to interpret the Bible with a "critical hermeneutic." As someone who did not grow up cuddling the Bible at bedtime, but rather experienced the Bible as an arsenal for hate, I've wrestled with its volatile social, political, ideological, religious, and spiritual value. Conservative Christianity asserts that the Bible determines what God wills and how Christians should live. I am opposed to imbuing the Bible with such a degree of authority over moral doctrines and law. Furthermore, I am opposed to ecclesiastical hierarchy dictating how the Bible governs my experiences. Instead, I believe the Bible's messages to be formative, existential, and inspirational, that is, open to different interpretations and responses that are informed by our different life experiences. I acknowledge that the Bible has already come to be influential and pervasive in U.S. culture, ideology, and aesthetics. But there is much more to learn from the Bible. The Bible can have value in helping discern what God is saying or doing *right now*.

Poised for social justice ministry as a queer of color, I feel called on to expose the complexities, intersections, and mechanisms of racial and sexual oppressions and power disparities. My wielding the Bible, of all things, may appear as if I wish to bang my head against the walls of cathedrals of oppression. However, having experienced oppression, I find in the Bible fertile grounds for deconstructing and strategically "taking back the word" while finding new ways to work toward God's peace, justice, and liberation. Doing so, I believe, requires reading the Bible as a "vein into the vessel" of dominant hegemony, that is, as a means to disrupt the prevailing, oppressive discourses in society. The goal is to provide a proactive discourse that does not cooperate with readings that only apologetically disrupt hegemony. The goal is not, for example, to interpret the Bible by trying to prove to dominant groups that queers of color are just like them (which is really just a manifestation of internalized oppression), or to use methodologically valid academic analyses to try to convince conservatives that their homophobic readings of scripture are fallacious (which often only expends energy). Personally, as I aim toward liberation I proactively reflect on *my* queer-of-color experience in light of the Bible.

My approach is informed by liberation theology, wherein activism and spirituality are one and the same. Praying with my brain has the same merit as praying with my hands and feet while marching in protest, organizing, and speaking up for the marginalized. I feel the presence of God when I am working for justice. Working for justice is how I pray. Of course, my most meaningful prayer/activism is when I can address the intersections of race and sexuality.

This year, on Good Friday, our San Francisco congregation observed the Stations of the Cross. I was asked to present on the event in the Passion narrative in which Simon carried the battered Jesus' cross to the crucifixion site. In our worship liturgy, Simon aided Jesus' stumble toward his death by helping him stand up, wiping away his sweat, and carrying the heavy cross. As usual, I stumbled to appropriate this text with authentic personal significance and activist implications. In my exegetical research I discovered that Simon appears in Matthew 27:31-32 (NRSV):

After mocking [Jesus], they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. As

they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross.

Simon's origin from Cyrene indicates that he was a nonnative, an immigrant. The only other time in the New Testament where Cyrene is mentioned is in reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:3-12, where those who spoke a plethora of languages found themselves able to communicate:

Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages. . . . And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each . . . speaking about God's deeds and power. All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" (NRSV)

On a queer commemoration of Good Friday at the Metropolitan Community Church in San Francisco, I presented the following personal, bicultural proactive reading.

* * *

For weeks during middle school I slept on the couch. Grandma/Barbara Lee/Chan Sien Kim's health wasn't so good. She complained of being lonely. Her barely passable English no longer enabled her to check out groceries. Once she even fell down the stairs. She would sit on the sofa all day watching game shows. Whenever I gave her an ear, she would dig into her cardigan sweater pockets, give me a starlight mint with Kleenex dust on the wrapper, and lament that she could no longer work. Sometimes she'd begin to tell me a story about her past, then midway through toss her wrists, as if swatting a fly, frustrated by her incomplete English. Or was it my incompetent Cantonese? Sometimes I would catch her staring out the window with slumped shoulders watching my dad doing yard work, the sun reflecting off her bifocals. Looking lost in the glare of her lens, her bony face looked fragile, sad. Her wrinkled skin seemed carved by all the borders and customs crossed.

Grandma, who had lost her husband, or gained her freedom, ten years before, always complained of being lonely. She complained that my sister and I were "too American," didn't go to church enough, didn't go to Chinese school, played too much "ball," and ate sweets before dinner. However, she never vocalized what I believed was her preeminent disgruntlement: life on the borderlands.

These were tension-filled weeks. Mom and Dad didn't talk to each other jovially at dinner anymore. My siblings and I knew better than to ask when we'd get our bedroom back, when we'd get to eat tacos instead of bittermelon and lotus root soup, or when we'd be allowed to let our dog, whose presence my grandmother resented and considered absurdly ridiculous, sit on the couch with us while we watched reruns of *Happy Days*.

For my old-country grandma, an "old folks" home meant abandonment. Inherent in her arranged marriage to an eldest son was the expectation that she dutifully toil after her mentally ill mother-in-law the majority of her sacrificed young adult years. I can envision her rubbing Tiger Balm into my great-grandmother's back. In a motion like peeling a carrot, with a spoon she would be scraping a Chinese-like character up and down her spine and to-and-fro her shoulder blades to heal a disease.

Now her turn, my mother, an "American"—which to many of us meant the same as "white"—was going to have none of it. After a series of nights of thundering fists and ricocheting yells, my dad found a live-in caretaker. Diane X spent two weeks with my grandmother at her house, shopping, cooking, and cleaning for her. "Too messy and cooks too salty," my grandmother judged. Then, Jane Y spent one week with my grandmother. "She took money out of purse!" my grandmother charged. Then, Betty Z spent a month with my grandmother. "She from Shanghai. Stuck up," my grandmother dismissed. In the next sentence she whispered into my ear, "I live with you; we have fun together," just as I noticed my dog in the backyard looking longingly at the door to be let in.

Next came Mei Gim. My white mother called her My Gum; my father never corrected her. Then again, neither did Mei Gim. She came into my grandmother's life at the critical juncture. My father—his mother's child, and a mother to the child his mother had become—had laid it down: "Last chance or to the Senior Home you go."

Throughout his life, it was his inherited duty to be the translator of "America" to her.

Mei Gim was scattered. She had no consciousness of "American" customs. She belched at dinner, wore cotton sweat pants and silk blouses, and used nylon leggings to compress her hair like a nightcap. I immediately liked her. Grandma said, "She knows how to clean, but cooks with too much oil," and it was a go! The muting fog lifted at home, I could chase my dog up and down on the couch cushions, and my parents' mouths ran convivially back and forth.

For years I visited Mei Gim and Grandma. My grandma became Mei Gim's translator of "America" and month by month Mei Gim greeted me with more and more English acquired from adult night school and from *Days of Our Lives*. Mei Gim would brave car-sickness and take me out to lunch often with a notebook and pen as our mediator. I discovered her husband was abusive and moving here kept her away from him. She'd puzzle about the fuss we made at Thanksgiving and would sit next to my grandmother, filling her plate watchfully, and then, over my parents' objections, stubbornly wash the dishes. She and my grandmother walked to the local park daily for exercise. They were often sighted giggling together like schoolgirls. She massaged my grandmother's arthritic back. She gave my grandmother water when she was thirsty and dry. She was the water to my family's journey through the barren terrain of compromising cultures.

On the morning the local hospice arranged the bed and morphine that would take my grandma to the World of Yin, I sat with Mei Gim. At the kitchen/mah-jongg table, Mei Gim spread butter on her toast, scraping the coarseness with a squealing knife. Emotionally raw, I thanked her for being the salve for my family. She said, "Your grandmother, my mother," then looking in my eyes, "You smart; you grandma proud of you. You learn; you stay in school. You meet *good* man; you get married."

When my father and I removed the life support tube from my grandmother's parched mouth, Mei Gim wailed, stroking her sweaty forehead, and later applied lipstick on my grandmother before the coroner's men carried her body out of the house.

Mei Gim, whose last name I still don't know, allied many worlds—hers, my grandmother's, my father's, my mother's, and my own. I see

Mei Gim now and then. With riveting determination, she always remembers to insist that I get married. But, my back is *not* a bridge to cultural "tradition." I want to be a welder, with a bandanna for sweat, like Rosie.