

YESU & LEFT-HANDED SHAME
A Metaphoric Atonement Narrative for Asian-Americans in the LGBT Community

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Historically evangelical Christians have used penal satisfaction images to “evangelize” to the LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer, Intersex, Asexual; for short LGBT) community, often making gay & transgender people the object of God’s wrath if they do not turn from lifestyles, same-sex attraction, or gender dysphoria—three things which they should feel guilty about. Such penal language has pushed away many members of the LGBT community from the church, many of them who were once followers of Christ but could not overcome the image of a God who judges them and refuses to love them because of an aspect of their life that seems so natural to them. One of the greatest issues that most people in the LGBT community face before coming to terms with their sexuality is shame – shame that is rooted in failure and pain, brought upon by marginalization and oppression. Even more, Asians within the LGBT community have experienced immeasurable amounts of shame as homosexuality meddles with the perfect image of the Asian family and expected gender roles. The gospel that the LGBT community – especially gay and transgender Asians – need to hear is a narrative where Jesus absorbs the shame they have experienced because of their sexuality. The following would be shared as if I were given the opportunity to speak with a group of LGBT community members who I have built a relationship with and were interested in learning more about the Jesus I follow.

Sam lived in a little village in the Canton region of China, the oldest of seven children. The village he lived in was very traditional and observed all of the Chinese customs, from praying to ancestors to eating meals at the family table. Sam’s parents instilled in their children how their actions affect the family honor and how the rest of their life will play out. With Sam being the eldest, his parents placed even more pressure on him since they expected him to take over the family rice farm once his father was unable to work. In Sam’s village, the village elders were especially superstitious and oppressive towards those born left-handed. The village elders

believed that all left-handed people were immoral and dirty and that something must have happened in their family's history for a child to be born with such shame. In fact, if a child did not learn or refused to write with their right hand by the age of 18, families would shun that child out of shame and dishonor brought to the family. The village elders also ostracized those children as "gwayilos" (which means "foreigner") and forced them to live outside of the village, where all the other shamed villagers lived.

Sam was always terrified of this because he was left-handed. When his parents first realized that Sam was left-handed, they did everything in their power to make sure Sam used his right hand for everything. Whenever he used his left hand they would harshly discipline him in front of his siblings. They always reminded Sam that if he did not learn to use his right hand, he would not be their son anymore and he would lose his inheritance. Whenever they were in public Sam always had to be near one of his parents, who ensured that he never used his left hand for anything. His parents always watched him because one public slip-up meant dishonor for their family and the image of their perfect family would be broken; such dishonor would ruin their family.

As Sam grew older he became uncomfortable by the ever-watchful eye of his parents. He hated how he felt like he could not be himself and that he could not do what seemed natural for him. He hated how he always had to pretend to be someone who had it altogether when he was around his friends. He hated how family meals always led to argument between him and his parents about his left-handedness. He hated how he felt so insecure about himself and that he could never be the son his parents expected him to be. He hated how his younger siblings always joked about him, made sly comments to him, and would use his left-handedness to manipulate him into doing things for them. Most of all, he hated the shame he felt because of his left-handedness and how he feared exclusion from his family and the rest of his village.

When Sam turned 18, he became weary of the fear of exclusion and decided to exclude himself. Sam declared his left-handedness to the whole village, willingly left, and lived with the other gwailos outside of the village. Sam rallied together other left-handed people from among the gwailos; together they advocated for the honor of all left-handed people and equal treatment. They entered the village every day and called for the rest of the village to accept them for who they were. Despite these actions and his new community, Sam still felt great shame. One day though a man named Yesu came through the village and proclaimed a message of freedom and reconciliation. Standing outside of the village wall, the gwailos listened to him and were amazed at his teaching, especially with how he spoke with compassion toward them. The other villagers were offended by Yesu's teachings since he spoke against the traditions of the elders and told him to leave. Overwhelmed with wonder though, Sam invited Yesu to have dinner at his home outside of the village. Yesu went with them, which the elders did not approve of because it was unacceptable to interact with the gwailos. They believed such interaction dishonored and defiled a person.

As Sam and his gwailo guests ate and drank together, Yesu spoke up and said to them, "I sense that many of you still carry a great amount of shame in your hearts because of your left-handedness. While we've been drinking and eating, none of you have noticed that I've been using both my right hand and my left hand to do everything. I have experienced your shame because I am both right-handed and left-handed. For this reason, in my own village I defended the honor of all who were oppressed and shamed, including left-handed people. The cost of such defense was my own people beating me to the point of death because they believed I was defiled and I had dishonored my family. Yet my Father—the Great Elder—ran to scene when he heard what had happened to me. Bringing the best medicine with him, he brought me back to life and acknowledged in front of my whole village that I was still his Son and that he was pleased with

me. Through this acknowledgement my Father showed the villagers that my defense of the oppressed and shamed was honorable—not shameful—and that the shame they casted upon me was in fact their shame. He explained to them that their shameful actions toward me were controlled by their fear of exclusion; their insecurities and inadequacies were directed at me in that moment. Instead of retribution though, he welcomed everyone—the oppressed and the oppressors—to our table that they would be united and be freed from shame. I want you to know that there is no shame in being left-handed. In fact, I want you to acknowledge your left-handedness. Yet, I invite you to come, follow me, and I will show you the way to real life. If you follow me, you must be willing to rediscover your identity and reconcile with those who have shamed you, all for the sake of love. Follow me and I will show you who you were really are—your true identity—and save you from your shame.”

At these words Sam wept, for he knew that despite finding solidarity with the gwailos he still carried the shame his parents inflicted on him and the shame he inflicted on himself. Falling at Yesu’s feet, he asked, “Yesu, what must I do be freed from my shame?” Yesu went to Sam, picked him up, and held him in his arms, replying, “Come to my table, share about your shame, and leave it there with me. We will then go to your family, the ones who have shamed you, and reconcile with them.” Immediately Sam left the village and followed Yesu to the village of the Great Elder. Sam regularly ate with Yesu and the other followers. No longer was he defined solely by his left-handedness, but he was defined as a follower of Yesu who so happened to be left-handed. Yesu also taught him the way of love, constantly encouraging Sam to leave his shame with him. Every time Sam shared his shameful experiences with Yesu, he experienced a measure of freedom from his fears, insecurities, and inadequacies. He no longer feared exclusion for who he was because everything that had shamed him had new redemptive meaning in the teachings of Yesu. Yesu had saved Sam from his shame.

Finally the day came when Yesu, Sam, and the rest of the followers returned to Sam's village. As they entered the village, Sam could feel every glance as if they were like daggers. Yesu looked to him and said, "Take heart. Do not be afraid or ashamed." As Sam walked towards his house, he saw his father and mother running towards him and became afraid of what they might do to him. Instead, his father and mother came to a halt, looked him in the eyes, and threw their arms around him. Sam could not believe it because this was the first time that they had ever embraced him. Afterwards his parents ushered Sam and Yesu inside the house and began sharing about how they had heard Yesu's message of love and reconciliation. Sam's parents expressed regret for how they allowed their shame and fear of exclusion to shame Sam while raising him. They wished they had focused more on honoring and loving their son by accepting his left-handedness instead of observing the tradition of the elders. They asked for forgiveness, and Sam forgave them. He and his parents sat around the family table, crying tears of joy because for the first time they were truly a family, united under their identity as followers of Yesu. Then Yesu said, "Children, this is what my table is all about, where pain and shame are gone and people can be who they are. It does not matter, if you are right-handed, left-handed, or can use both, because all people who follow me and keep my words are my family and dearly beloved."

Brothers and sisters, I share this story with you as someone who has felt shame because of same-sex attraction. Shame caused me to feel like I could not share about what I was experiencing and who I believe I am. For so long I felt ashamed of my being and that God didn't love me; then I met this Jesus who takes my shame away, this Jesus who is Yesu. Jesus welcomes me at the table, with open arms of love, unafraid of who I am and what I identify as. How does Jesus take away my shame though? On the cross as Jesus was dying he experienced the shame I have felt all of my life as shame was cast upon him by his own people. On the cross

Jesus exposed inappropriate shame by experiencing physical, verbal, and emotional shame he did not deserve. Since Jesus lived an honorable life and died under inappropriate shame, he took upon himself the shame of the world without being shamed and took it away forever. Jesus did not stay dead though, and through his resurrection the path is open for our honor to be restored and to be given new identities as children of God. Shame could not hold Jesus down. At the table he invites us to express our shame to him and to leave it with him, so we can be free to be who we really are. We are no longer slaves to fear shameful exclusion. Yet Jesus invites us to not find our identity solely in our sexuality, but to find our identity in him and to let him help us understand our sexuality. It is a scary thing to do, but the risk is worth the reward because only in Jesus can we experience freedom from the shame that has weighed us down for so long. Come to the table where the cross once stood, my brothers and sisters, and meet with those who have experienced similar shame. At the table see how Jesus' death and resurrection has saved you from your shame, restores your honor, and gives you new identity. Let us share our shame at the table together and leave our shame and fear of exclusion with Jesus. Let us follow Jesus together—willing to forgive and reconcile with those who have shamed us—and walk in our restored honor, freedom, and new identities as children of God.

In the preceding parable, the focus of the work of the cross and resurrection is how Jesus confronts the shame which we place on ourselves and the shame which we receive from others. Left-handedness and its exclusion represents the experience which many LGBT people face upon coming out. Yet Jesus, Jesus, shows that he doesn't care about our shame and all he cares about is being with us. On the cross Jesus takes upon all the shame we have experienced because he has experienced the ultimate shame, death on the cross and separation from his Father. By victorious resurrection, Jesus' honor as the Son of God is restored and, in turn, the honor of all those who choose to be called a child of God is restored as well. At the banqueting table, Jesus

invites everyone to come and share about their shame and to leave it with him, that we may leave the table in freedom by not taking our shame with us again.

This parable is greatly aimed at people who have experienced shame because of some part of their life which they believe they cannot control. It is designed to show people that Jesus desires to walk with them in that aspect of their life. It also shows that Jesus offers to help people process through their shame because he has experienced it as well. There are many paradigms about the atonement that the metaphoric narrative does not address though that could be relevant to the LGBT community. The first paradigm that is not addressed is how Jesus' work on the cross and the resurrection addresses defilement and cleanliness. If members of the LGBT community grew up going to church, it is more than likely that a majority of them struggled with the idea of their same-sex attraction or their gender dysphoria causing them to be defiled and unclean in God's eyes. This is more than likely due to a gospel that perceives sin as making someone dirty and God cannot be in relationship with someone until they are cleansed. Some of them may need to hear about how Jesus absorbs our defiled state on the cross without becoming unclean and his shed blood cleanses us from all our perceived dirtiness.

Another paradigm which this metaphor does not address is how the cross and resurrection overcome injustice and brings liberation, particularly in the context of political and economic oppression. Often enough the American church has used politics to champion the "sanctity of marriage" and to provide opposition to the "homosexual and transgender lifestyles." Instead of using politics as a means of bringing about the kingdom, it may be wise for American Christians to begin considering how the gospel looks forward to a kingdom where everyone experiences freedom and care. I have met many people from the LGBT community who are turned off by the Christianity because the gospel that was communicated to them screams oppression and marginalization from their perceived worldview; God is this tyrant who tells

everyone how they must act, feel, and be. This metaphor also does not include how as followers of Christ we eventually need to address how we have shamed others. Although I originally included it in the metaphor, I decided to omit it because I do not believe such language and imagery would initially be effective for a community that has long been victimized by the church and society.

This metaphor is used as an invitation to experience a life with Jesus where shame is no more and we can live honorably as God created us to be. At the same time, this invitation also extends the challenge to have the LGBT community surrender their perceived worldview of sexuality and to allow their identity in Christ to shape their understanding of sexuality. Many gay Christians experience difficulty in following Jesus at times because they are unable to surrender this aspect of their life that has become a huge part of their identity. I believe the metaphor I shared encourages those within the LGBT community who are interested in discovering more about their homosexuality in the frame of being in relationship with God to do so in a way where they don't have to give up their identity or their same-sex attraction. The metaphor does challenge them to allow something else to help define their identity though. My hope and prayer is that when this story is shared with those within the LGBT community who are open and willing to listen, they will experience healing from their past and that they will run to Jesus' table, ready to leave their shame with him and discover who they truly are.