

## Sermon: The Rhododendron Effect of the Holy Spirit

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Scripture: Acts 9:1–19



A few years ago, on Mother’s Day, my younger son said, “Mom, happy Double Super Power Day!”

I did not know what he meant, so my eyes quickly searched his face. He looked at me with a big smile and continued, “You are a mother, and it’s Asian Heritage Month! That gives you a double super power!”

Cute.

Since then, I have never forgotten that declaration, especially whenever Mother’s Day comes around again.

Thank you for calling me and inviting me here from Vancouver Island. Where my family and my church are now, in Victoria, rhododendrons are everywhere. Right now, their large, thick buds—like asparagus tips that have spent the whole winter filling and growing the flower inside, becoming thick and full—are beginning to open.



I love watching those huge buds, grown thick all winter, begin to split open, and then, suddenly, a mountain of flowers starts to come out. To me, it looks like a red Korean *hanbok* skirt, folded tightly and beginning to unfold. It is as if the flower comes out like a person. That is why I titled this sermon, “The Rhododendron Effect of the Holy Spirit.”

I have now lived in Canada for nineteen years. That is amazing to me. And because I have been serving as Co-Lead Minister at Broad View United for more than three years, the way I experience myself has changed greatly. The church where I serve has many staff members, and at times there have been as many as five ministers working together, including me. In that setting, I am one of the lead ministers. When I go to church, people welcome me, smile at me, recognize me, discuss important decisions with me, and sometimes trust me to make those decisions.

Before this, I carried a conscious habit and understanding that, in order for people to recognize me, I had to show who I was: what thoughts and perspectives I had, and what gifts I carried. I had to preach, present, speak up, and demonstrate myself before people would even barely begin to think, “Oh, she has value.” I had to repeat and repeat the work of earning recognition before I could even sit at the table.

That was not only a conscious habit. It was also necessary. I had to actively reveal myself just to be barely included. Otherwise, I could easily be pushed outside the realm of attention, care, interest, and decision-making—into the margin, the shadow, the corner.



So, if I say this through the image of the rhododendron, I had to force open the avocado-coloured outer bud to show the red flower inside me in order to exist, to prove that I had value and insight—to be seen as a respected member, as someone of worth.

In truth, the very beginning of the Rhododendron Effect of the Holy Spirit may have begun when I left Korea with my partner, Min-Goo, and our eight-month-old first son, to explore a more open society in 2007. While many of my friends in Korea were focused on getting jobs in their twenties, I chose first to get married and have a child. During the two years we lived in a church manse, I sensed that being married and having a child, but not having a job, was the beginning of being continually marginalized in society, and especially within the church—pushed into patriarchal roles and into a kind of forever marginalization.

Especially within the Korean church, people expected me to become the minister's wife, the *Samonim*, a “smiling angel”—the angel who always has a smile on her face, but no voice. When I felt there was no way out, Min-Goo asked me during a conversation at a playground, while my mother briefly watched our baby, “What if you became a minister?”

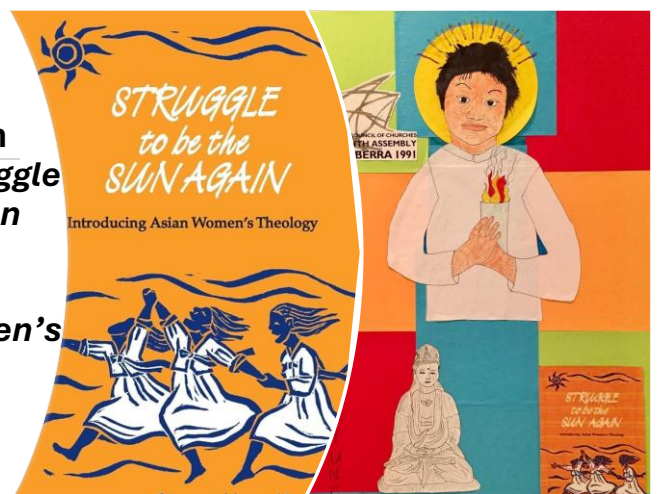
In that moment, I suddenly remembered the calling I had experienced as a child, but had covered over because I was not a boy.

Around that same time, I discovered a poem by Japanese feminist poet Hiratsuka Raicho called “Struggle to be the Sun Again.” I found it in a book with the same title, written by Korean eco-feminist theologian Chung Hyun Kyung: *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*. Across almost a hundred years, Hiratsuka's words reached me:

Originally, woman was the Sun.  
She was an authentic person.  
But now woman is the moon.  
She lives by depending on another  
and shines by reflecting another's light.  
Her face has a sickly pallor.  
We must now regain our hidden sun.  
Reveal our hidden sun!  
Rediscover our natural gifts!

*Hiratsuka Raicho*

**Chung Hyun  
Kyung: *Struggle  
to be the Sun  
Again:  
Introducing  
Asian Women's  
Theology.***



That cry reached me. I, who had once been active, outspoken, and full of agency before marriage, was slowly becoming passive and pale—like the moon, shining only by reflecting my minister husband's light. And so I prayed, “I must become the Sun again.” I enrolled myself in Vancouver School of Theology and began the journey toward ordination.

The United Church of Canada did give me leverage in one sense: as a woman, I was encouraged to walk an independent path. But at the same time, in order to express the full capacity of my Double Super Power Rhododendron self, I still had to keep forcing open the thick bud, layer by layer, just to bloom and be seen.

If I summarize those nineteen years in one phrase, it would be this:

**“I am racialized because I am a woman; I am a woman because I am racialized.”**

I cannot speak for all East Asian or Korean immigrant women. Not everyone shares the same experience. But in order to speak about racism in the way I have experienced it, I must begin with my story of coming away from a patriarchal society.

Canada is not a pure land, free from patriarchy and fully championing women’s rights. When we are not only women, but racialized women, we still encounter patriarchal forces that diminish us. It took me almost a decade after coming to Canada to fully understand that. Racism and sexism came at me together. As an Asian immigrant woman, an international student, a newcomer mom with two children, someone who looked different and spoke differently, patriarchal assumptions were always in the air I breathed.

The church started talking more about racism and White privilege. But conversations about racism often left out sexism, patriarchy, and the lived experiences of racialized women. I was dismayed. Why were we not centering the experiences of racialized women—women struggling simultaneously with racism and patriarchy, two forces crashing upon us together at the same intersection?

**“We are racialized because we are women; we are women because we are racialized.”**

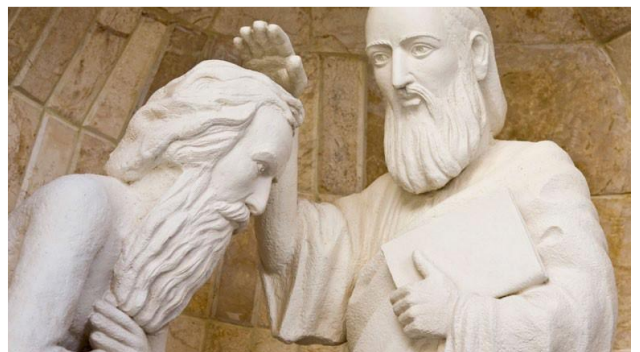
Patriarchy impacts us most sharply precisely where race and gender intersect. Our experiences are different from those of White women. Our experiences are different from those of racialized men. And so, as racialized women, we are often doubly marginalized because we are neither White nor male. The voices, perspectives, hopes, and work of racialized women should be much more central to our shared work.

When I am intersectionally stereotyped, I feel as though I am a nail, and a hammer strikes me into the ground one inch deeper each time, making me feel invisible, unengaging, uninteresting, unimportant, dismissible—as though I do not possess the leadership, skills, talents, or gifts to contribute, or to be treated as an equal to those around me.

And yet, from those days until now, as I stand here worshipping with you as Double Super Power Ha Na, preaching an Asian Heritage Month sermon on Mother’s Day Sunday through Asian women’s experience, the unfolding of the rhododendron has continued to burst open.

So then, why did I choose Acts of the Apostles chapter 9 as today’s Scripture passage while thinking about this Double Super Power Day for Asian women? Because I believe this story must become not only the story of Asian women, but the story of all women, all women of colour, all racialized people, all queer folks, all people of God—all people carrying God-given gifts, diversity, agency, and their own unique, strong rhododendron-ness.

And we do not need to prove it.



Others need to respect it.

The reason I chose today's Scripture is also because I saw myself in Saul's transformation. Saul, before he became Paul, was deeply filled with prejudice against those who followed Jesus, and he fiercely persecuted them. Then he was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians when, suddenly, a blazing light flashed around him, and he fell to the ground. That light was the light of Jesus' manifestation, and Saul came to an understanding: God's love extends even to the Gentiles. In persecuting those who followed Jesus, he was in fact persecuting Jesus himself, and Jesus was the manifestation of God's love directed toward all people.



Yet this understanding of God's love, which came like a flash of lightning from God, also blinded his eyes. While he was blinded, someone had to lead him in order for him to move forward, and someone had to feed him in order for him to eat. At that time, God spoke to Ananias, who was also in Damascus, and told him not to hesitate, but to go to where Saul was and baptize him. When Ananias went to Saul, before even calling his name, he addressed him by saying, "Brother Saul." Then, the Scripture says, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes.

This Scripture passage brings back my own experience because, although I tried so hard by myself to help people understand the experiences of racialized women and Asian women, and although I carried a kind of insight given through God's flash—through lived experience—I was also like Saul, blinded by the flash God gave me. I still needed an Ananias to come to me, someone who would call me "sister," "kin," or "friend," just as Ananias called Saul "Brother Saul."

To be filled with the Holy Spirit is not merely to remain within one's own understanding, blinded by a flash of insight. It is to have the experience of Ananias and Saul—an experience in which someone calls me brother, sister, kin, or friend.

The reason is that, just as in today's Scripture, it is only when another person calls us brother, sister, kin, or friend that something like scales falls from our eyes. And it is not merely through God's blinding flash, but when we meet a co-worker in the Spirit who calls our name, standing before us, that the church of God is renewed by the Holy Spirit.



So how do we become a church community that is alive in the Holy Spirit—active, changing, challenging, recharged, and overflowing?

The scales must fall from our eyes.

There was a moment in my life, when I was in Winnipeg, when I myself entered such a post-Pentecost moment between Ananias and Saul. There was a time when I could not yet see the stories of Indigenous women, racialized women, and Asian women as one connected story. Of course, the uniqueness of those experiences exists. But at that time, I knew only the differences.

At that time, key intercultural and racialized leaders gathered for an intercultural forum within The United Church of Canada. We gathered almost like conspirators, saying, “Let’s change the Conference together.” At one of those meetings, Susie McPherson-Derendy arrived and sat beside me. I did not yet know her well. I had heard of her, but still, in my mind, she was she, and I was I. The experience of an Indigenous woman and the experience of a racialized Korean Asian woman felt separated by the width of the table and the distance between our chairs. We met together. We discussed together. But we were not yet connected.



I was not yet seeing her as someone who could make the scales fall from my eyes. I was not yet seeing her as someone who, like Ananias, might reach out a hand to lead me when I was blind and unable to walk forward alone. I was not yet seeing her as someone who might sit at the same table and feed me. I was blinded by the flash of God’s light, but I was still without relationship.



At that time, I was passionately crying out that racial justice and anti-patriarchy must be seen together. But I was not yet looking for who else was crying out for the Holy Spirit with the same intensity of intersectionality. I had no expectation that I would meet such a person at all. At that time, I was crying out alone. I did not know how to explain this experience better. I did not know how to help others understand. I did not know who I was supposed to become within this intersectionality.

And while I was crying out like that, Susie—sitting beside me—looked at me and said, “I know. We need decolonizing. Decolonizing is the key to so many things we share.”

In that moment, the scales in my eyes that separated “Susie” from “me” fell off, and the meaning of *we* opened. Just as decolonizing liberates Susie, decolonizing liberates me and all Asian women.

Whether we are racialized or not,  
whether we are male or not,  
whether we are women or not,  
whether we are queer or not,  
whether we are Indigenous or not—  
the scales must fall from all our eyes that still separate us.

All of us must see the blazing flash of the Holy Spirit of God that decolonizes all boundaries. But for the Holy Spirit to work among us, we need to find each other and be in relationship.

All of us need another person's calling us "sister," "brother", "friend," or "kin" to open our understanding.

All of us need another person to feed us with understanding and love.

So that we may be born again with God's Holy Spirit of interconnectedness.

So that we may become the Sun again.

So that we may become open rhododendrons.

So that we may become like Paul and Ananias in this post-Pentecost story.

So that we may become Holy Spirit-filled Christians and community.

So that no one needs to prove themselves anymore.

So that everyone is invited to the Table.

When we look at a person—an Asian woman leader, mother, neighbour—the scales must fall from our eyes. We must not become cold and arrogant racially privileged, male-privileged, centered people who say, "Only after I see the red flower inside you will I measure the value of your existence."

We should not place upon Asian women the burden of constantly proving themselves by repeatedly displaying the gifts and talents of their red rhododendron flowers just to sit at the table and be valued.

Rather, through the Holy Spirit wounding our ego, through the scales of prejudice and glass ceilings falling away, we must learn to see Asian women with eyes of understanding and relationship—as powerful members of the Christian community and society's table.

And on this joyful day of Double Super Power for all Asian women, may we sing ourselves into that truth:

*we, sister, sibling, kin.*

Amen.

