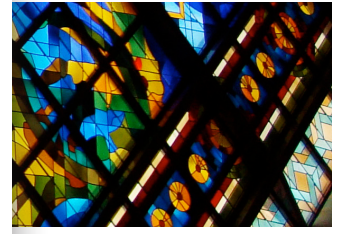


# 40 DAYS OF ENGAGEMENT on Anti-Racism



DAY 4

## Asian Beauty and Basketball

Kenji Marui



### Learning

I am a basketball fan, and a staunch supporter of the Toronto Raptors. I play casually, goofing around in my church's gym. Standing at a lofty 5'4" in shoes, I am far too familiar with my shot getting blocked and being denied rebounds because of my stature. I come by my shortcomings honestly as the child of Japanese immigrants. My official playing statistics boast two points scored in a five-year high school career.

I love basketball because the best teams actually believe in teamwork. I love the pass that leads to the pass that gets the basket. Basketball may be a league of superstars, but I always cheer for the underdog, and for limited-role players that contribute in unseen or unnoticed ways.

Jeremy Lin was a flash-in-the-pan basketball star. His first year with the 2012 Knicks led to the New York sports media machine exuberantly diagnosing a pandemic of "Linsanity" spreading through the league. During an impressive debut as a starter, his play ignited

a seven-game win streak, set NBA records, and won him "Player of the Week" honours. Lin was also the first American of Chinese or Taiwanese descent to play in the NBA.

With the spotlight came scrutiny, critique, and criticism. Some scoffed, "He's only a big deal because he's Asian," saying if he was American (he was born and grew up in America) or European, no one would consider his game play as exceptional. Others dismissed and discounted the racism he experienced as lesser, because he wasn't Black.

Earlier this year, in the throes of fear and uncertainty caused by COVID-19 (which you might also remember was called by some the "Wuhan Flu," "Kung Flu" and "Chinese Virus"), Jeremy Lin shared this on Instagram:

*Something is changing in this generation of Asian Americans. We are tired of being told that we don't experience racism, we are tired of being told to keep our heads down and not make trouble. We are tired of*

*Asian-American kids growing up and being asked where they're REALLY from... We are tired of the stereotypes in Hollywood affecting our psyche and limiting who we think we can be. We are tired of being invisible, of being mistaken for our colleague, or told our struggles aren't as real.*

*I want better for my elders who worked so hard and sacrificed so much to make a life for themselves here. I want better for my niece and nephew and future kids. I want better for the next generation of Asian American athletes...*

*Being an Asian American doesn't mean we don't experience poverty and racism. Being a 9-year NBA veteran doesn't protect me from being called "coronavirus" on the court. Being a man of faith doesn't mean I don't fight for justice, for myself and for others.*

This plea into cyberspace struck a chord with me. He named the socialized norm that Asians were unattractive. I was unattractive. He named my truth. I was neither "tall, dark, and handsome"

nor “blond-haired, blue-eyed.” TV, movies, books, and music videos excluded me from the role of romantic lead.

Asian representation in the media during my formative years reinforced my abnormality.

Consider what having movie characters like Long Duck Dong in *Sixteen Candles*, Data from *Goonies*, and Short Round from *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* does for kids who don't see anyone else on the big screen that remotely resembles them. These characters were secondary at best. People who looked like me were nerds, geeks, and dweebs, providing comic relief and serving as the antithesis of hunky quarterbacks or brooding bad boys. Of brains, beauty, or brawn, I never considered anything beyond book smarts as a possibility.

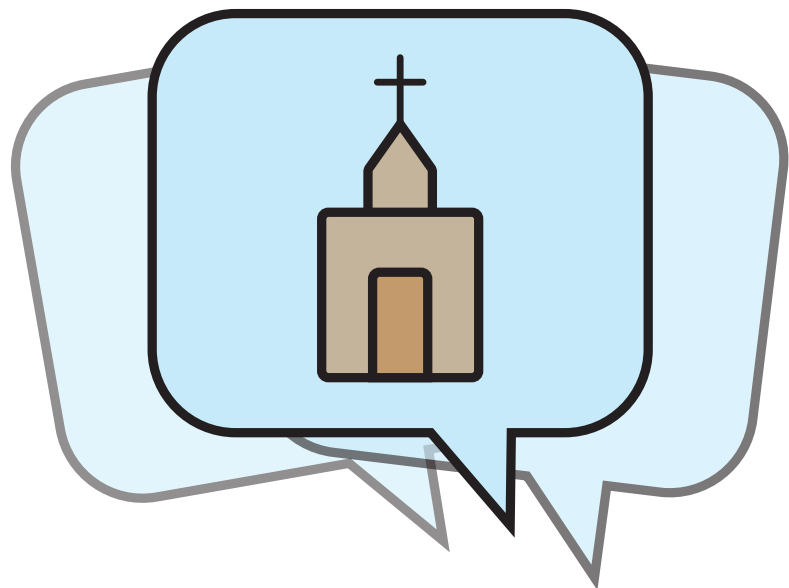
I remember roaming the schoolyard during recess pinching the bridge of my flat nose in an effort to reshape my almond eyes into something more “Canadian,” more “normal.” Never mind that I was Japanese—I wondered if my school bullies and bystanders could even understand the deeply ingrained hatred between China and Japan.

This excessively personal and cathartic reflection hinges on acceptance of superficial beauty. Throughout my life, I've pushed back against shallow benchmarks of skin-deep attractiveness mediated by the entertainment industry. I've worked on my personal physical fitness for all the benefits of health and well-being and yet, I found myself responding to Jeremy Lin's disdain at being “deceptively athletic” with agreement, anger, and anguish.

Churches everywhere preach about the integration of body, mind, and spirit, of promoting wholeness and healthiness within each of these components of our being. We need to pay more attention to what messages society and church are communicating about bodies, question why some are considered superior and sexier, and examine the racial

implications of attraction and desire. All of this deeply affects self-esteem. If we are to love our neighbour as we love ourselves (Mark 12: 31, Matthew 22: 39, Luke 10: 27), that assumes we love ourselves, and that we behold ourselves as beautiful.

Jeremy Lin gave voice to the conviction that being people of faith doesn't mean we don't fight for justice for ourselves and for others. Therein is the beauty of this moment: an engaged society that realizes that Black Lives Matter, commits to Stop Asian Hate, and will Idle No More. Beyond slogans and hash tags, the true beauty of these movements is what smoulders underneath: a commitment to deeper and more direct connections between groups of people regardless of physical appearance and a willingness to share space and stories. May it be so. Amen.





## Faith Reflection

Dearest loving beautiful God,  
Creator of all:

We give thanks for the allure and attractiveness of every single one of us.  
We are created in your image, created in beauty and power and promise.  
Help us to recognize with our minds,  
and our hearts,  
and our spirits,  
what is truly gorgeous and glorious.

Open us to respond to the inner beauty that resides within,  
resisting the myths of our superficial culture.

May we find within ourselves, confidence in our being.  
May we understand that cosmetics do not define normalcy,  
that aesthetics are an addition and not the core of who we are.

Help us, O God, to find beauty within ourselves.  
Liberate us from the norms of what is desirable and attractive.

Shallow standards hold us captive,  
by limiting imagination and connection  
by reinforcing contemptible stereotypes and  
detracting from our collective humanity.

Release us from the prisons of preference and privilege that condemn through physical appearance.  
Let us love ourselves so that we may love our neighbours.  
Attune us to all the forms of beauty in this wonderful world,  
within and around us,  
may we be your beloved and beautiful people.

In Christ we pray,  
Amen.



## Children's Activity

Once upon a time,  
there was a boy

named Jeremy who loved to play basketball. He was very good at it. He could dribble, he could pass, he could shoot. He practiced and practiced. He dreamed of playing in the NBA like LeBron James and Kobe Bryant.

The problem was that people didn't believe in the boy. They thought that because his parents were from Taiwan that he wasn't good at basketball. College teams overlooked him. Professional teams overlooked him. They didn't

look at his playing ability because of his race.

Very few Asian players are in the NBA. None of them had won a championship. Everyone assumed that Jeremy wouldn't be very good because he looked different.

Jeremy worked hard. Jeremy practiced a lot. But he didn't get to play in a lot of games. His first team gave up on him. His second team gave up on him. His third team did something different. They made him a starter, and made sure he played in lots of games.

What are some lessons and ideas that we could learn from Jeremy's life?

And Jeremy made lots of baskets! He set records for how many points he scored. His team won 7 games in a row. He won awards.

Jeremy is outspoken about his faith. He knows that God helps him believe in himself when others don't. He works hard and keeps trying. Jeremy Lin was the first Asian American to win an NBA championship when he played with the Raptors in 2019!



## Group Commitment

If we are what we eat, let us be mindful of what we consume in media. Technology allows for more and more visual imagery to bombard us from many screens. Let us, therefore, be vigilant and watchful for beauty myths in movies, TV shows, commercials, and books.

Ask “Who is beautiful?” or more accurately, “who is described as beautiful?”

Wonder why that is. Wonder who gets to decide.

Identify any explicit or implied correlations between moral character and physical appearance. Are the villains less attractive? What makes them so?

Wonder why that is. Wonder who gets to decide.

Make a note of any romantic storylines and who gets to kiss whom.

Wonder why that is. Wonder who gets to decide.

Note the racial identity of the heroes, of the bad guys, of supporting characters. How much

Let us commit ourselves to critical engagement of the stories told to us, and the stories that we ourselves tell. Such wonder is a beautiful thing.

screen time and speaking lines do Indigenous and racialized people receive? How much do racial stereotypes affect their roles?

Wonder why that is. Wonder who gets to decide.



## Advocacy

The personal is political and nothing is more personal than the perception of beauty and attraction. Yet even this intensely private personal choice has been filtered through social norms of racism and White privilege that deem certain complexions and body types more desirable than others. Perhaps the most radical and revolutionary act of advocacy is to love ourselves as we are. Then the Great Commandment is possible: loving our

neighbours. The tangible action of seeing the beauty in others is not a directive to voyeurism, but a call to resist myths and misconceptions.

Another call to action is an invitation to broaden the scope of our fandom: become a supporter or admirer of an artist, actor, athlete, or musician who looks different than most. No matter how worldly, how intercultural, how diverse and broadminded we may be, there is always an underrepresented group.

I believe that such attention evolves into deeper connection and genuine appreciation, further leading to more exploration and engagement with similar stories, expanding our horizons and widening awareness to appreciate the work of those creators who represent a beauty that we may subconsciously reject.

After all, life is beautiful.



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