

2017 Joel R. Workin Scholarship Essays
Ben Hogue

1. Please write a paragraph or two in response to the following question: What is the prophetic word that LGBTQ people can bring to the church today?

I didn't know where else to go the morning of June 12, 2016, other than church -- I went twice that day. I had spent most of the night and that morning weeping with friends and loved ones, my heart racing as we watched the news reports from Orlando, Florida. The number of lives lost kept ticking up and I was numb. I didn't want to do anything or go anywhere, but there was a nudge for me to go to church. Somehow I ended up in worship, surrounded by a community of hugs and love, listening to an out, gay man preach the Gospel. It was the only time for about a month I didn't question my safety. The next thing I knew, it was evening and I was in downtown San Francisco marching down Market Street towards City Hall.

“Out of the bars and into the streets!”

“Queer Lives Matters!”

“Latinx Lives Matter!”

“Trans Lives Matter!”

“Black Lives Matter!”

“Pulse Lives Matter!”

“OUT OF THE BARS!”

“AND INTO THE STREETS!”

The prophetic word that LGBTQ people bring to the church today is their existence and persistence, even in the face of hatred and violence. I am reminded of Joel's words from his essay *Doubts*, “Our very existence is an offense, an affront, to the bulk of Christendom. We are jailed in society, hunted down, disciplined, or worse, by the Church for our love.” Nevertheless, we persist and we must not let anyone stop us from dancing and loving and preaching and marching and existing. We are called to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, bringing the gifts of our whole selves -- our bodies, our sexualities, our genders -- to the church. We must not do this out of spite, rather out of a deep love for God, the Gospel, and desire for reconciliation with our neighbor, knowing it might not be safe and that we may still have doubts. For me, in June, prophetic was the existence and persistence of my LGBTQ+ siblings; it continues to be to this day. The ways they have shown up and continue to do so enables me to see that our existence in/to the church all along has been prophetic. Thanks be to God!

2. As an LGBTQ person, where have you heard and spoken “Yes, period” and “No, period” on your journey of call thus far? In this 500th anniversary of the Reformation, where do you see the church being called to move more fully into God’s “Yes, period” and what particular gifts do you think LGBTQIA people bring to that movement of reformation?

I cannot help but hear “Great is Thy Faithfulness” when I read Joel’s essay *Overflowing*. It might not seem like an obvious fit, and yet for me, the song and the essay speak to my experience, my call, and the ways in which I see the church moving. If you are able, I invite you, the reader, to take a few minutes to listen (or play/sing!) the hymn. (I am fond of [this version](#) from CeCe Winans and her mother, Delores -- from a CD my grandmother played. This hymn can also found in the ELW Hymn 733).

*Great is Thy Faithfulness!
Great is Thy Faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see.
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided,
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!*

God’s great faithfulness is a “*Yes, period.*” for me. I have heard it and I have felt it. I would not be where I am today without God’s “*Yes, period.*” For me, it has taken shape in supportive family members, faithful communities that I am able to bring my whole self to, and experiences that allowed me to hear my call in new and profound ways. Yet, it seems recently, certainly within the last year, “*No period.*” is being heard more than ever, especially when it comes to religious freedoms both in the United States and around the world. “*No, period.*” is being heard by refugees seeking a better life for their family; “*No, period.*” is being heard by the Sioux in North Dakota. “*No, period.*” was heard by African-American Bible Study goers in their AME Church in Charleston.

LGBTQ+ individuals are hearing “*No, period.*” as well, both inside and outside the church. “*No, period.*” from county clerks not willing to issue marriage licenses; “*No, period.*” from congregations not willing to ‘take the risk’ on a queer pastoral candidate; “*No, period.*” is even being said as some are trying to use a restroom. Too often “*No, period.*” becomes the only chorus LGBTQ+ people hear. Though I have lived a different reality than some and been afforded privileges in my life that many have not, I still live with the question, “When is my “*No, period.*” going to come?”

This reality is heartbreaking, hope-breaking even, still it is God's new mercies we see...God's felt and heard "*Yes, period.*" that seeks us out and that we cannot escape. Joel writes that not even death will keep God's love from us. "[God's] love, and I say this by faith and not by fact, is the mightiest thing in all creation and nothing will keep it from us. It wills forth from God. It soaks into the cross. It floods the tomb. It will find us. It will not rest, or be patient or idle or sit at home until "*Yes.*" finds us."

"*Yes, period.*" finds us and the proclamation of God's love and "*Yes!*" is the gift LGBTQ+ bring as we recognize and celebrate the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. We know what hate and "*No, period.*" sound and feel like from the church. Inspired by the early reformers and their movement, we respond to it with our bold convictions of love and that the great faithfulness of God is already embracing the church, even when it says "*No!*". However, "*Yes, period.*" is not a result or a destination, rather a process that the church must move more fully into. Just as those that started the Reformation movement did not expect results overnight, we must recognize the process that this new movement of "*Yes, period.*" will be. As Luther sees this for all Christians in their lives, I see it for the church as well:

"Christian living does not mean to be good but to become good; not to be well but to get well; not being, but becoming; not rest, but training. We are not yet, but we shall be. It has not yet happened, but it is the way. Not everything shines and sparkles as yet. But everything is getting better."

The gift of being bold and prophetic, proclaiming the "*Yes*" while still hearing the "*No*" is something LGBTQ+ people have been doing since they were in community in Ancient Israel and accompanying Jesus in first century Palestine. It continues to be a process as we are "not being, but becoming." 'Being' is not our reality, which allows 'becoming' in the form of planning and hoping for a better tomorrow to take shape. Though the church does not "shine and sparkle" as yet, LGBTQ+ people do. As our shine and sparkle are proclaimed and heard, the process of "everything getting better", God's love and "*Yes!*", is realized.

I wonder with Joel about what it is that keeps us LGBTQ+ Christians going. After all the mess so many have gone through, why do we even continue "to act as if the Church mattered", he pondered. It's God's faithfulness unto us, God's love "that has overflowed from God's own heart [that] continues to find a home in us" and it is what keeps us shining and sparkling.

A quote comes to mind from St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta: "We can do not great things, only small things with great love." God can do great things, we can only do small things with

God's great love, God's great faithfulness, God's "Yes, period." As our world's realities overwhelm our minds and hearts with "No, period." and we feel helpless that we cannot do all of the things needed to bring God's Kin(g)dom on Earth, we must proclaim the process of 'not being, but becoming', 'not yet, but shall be'. There are times when God's great faithfulness had held us up and given us courage with a loving "Yes, period." to continue on, morning by morning. It is how LGBTQ+ people respond with courage and 'great love' to do small things. It is how our early church mothers and fathers were empowered to reform. As we live into the next 500 years of reformation, let it be so, too, for the church and for the world.

*All I have needed Thy hand hath provided,
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!*