

I first heard a bit of Joel Workin's story in a book titled *Queer Clergy*, written by RW Holman. I responded to a call for bloggers to review this book and share their reviews in a variety of online forums. A part of my review included the following, "This book is a straightforward and concise history text, but for me, its real value is in naming the pioneering and prophetic queer clergy who have gone before me. I do not find myself moved to tears by books very often, but I have a lot personally invested in this history and I give thanks over and over again for the brave clergy, bishops, and allies who led the way." I was struck by the bravery of the "Berkeley Three" and wished it was possible for me to meet them and thank them. It was shortly after reviewing this book that I finally felt courageous enough to join Proclaim in my last year of seminary. I have been blessed to meet Rev. Jeff Johnson and to "meet" Joel Workin through the many people who love him and through his brilliant and prophetic writings.

My coming out story is unique, because it is mine, but also not at all unique, as I have learned through being warmly welcomed into the community of Proclaim. I did not come out to myself until the age of 29, and this only happened as a result of my hard work in becoming sober. As an alcoholic in recovery and working my way through a twelve step program, I was finally able to look myself in the face and admit that I, Amy Christine Hanson, am not only an alcoholic, but that I am queer. This revelation came with consequences in my personal life, as my family has not been entirely supportive. I am learning what it means to be out as a public figure in the role of intern pastor in my current context, which is an exceptionally conservative synod.

When I received a copy of Joel's book, *Dear God, I am gay—thank you!*, I devoured it in a couple hours. I found myself alternately weeping and laughing. But I returned again and again to Joel's sermon, "The Light of Lent." This is a brilliant example of queering a certain theological conviction, that of the presumed penitential nature of Lent. But more important, I found myself returning to this sermon because it speaks to my own coming out journey as a queer woman, as a pastor, and as a beloved child of God.

Joel preaches that we want a Lent of darkness and gloom because it leaves us alone in our shadowy isolation. It gives us time to focus on ourselves and wallow in our own darkness. Preferring the darkness because to let the light in would legitimately kill us. This is the worst possible example of *incurvatus se*, a turning in on one's self. If we quit clenching shut our eyes against the light of Lent, against the promise of what is coming in this springtime of the church, the brilliant light would kill us. Joel preaches that we do not fear the light itself, but what the light

reveals to and about us. And that in order to come to the light, there is a lot of dying that must happen to us. The sin of our separation from the neighbor must die. Our sinful attempts to be perfect instead of being present in the world must die. All the times that we stall on the road to justice and peace instead of pushing relentlessly onward must die also. Because if we stay in the darkness, we do not have to open ourselves to the Light of love and healing. Because to be open means to be vulnerable.

A part of me loved the darkness of my alcoholism. A part of me loved the darkness of the closet. I said more than once that I would prefer settling in a hell that I already knew rather than risk potential healing and wholeness. The darkness was preferable to the light. Because if I was living in the light, I also had to stop turning in on myself and listen to where God is calling.

I recently came out of yet another closet. A closet created by many years of unwelcoming church experiences and a difficult family situation, believing that I was not one of God's beloved creations. On the 2014 Proclaim retreat a new friend asked me, "When will you stop apologizing for who you are and what you are called to do?" And suddenly, the light shown in the cracks of the door and I was no longer alone in the darkness. As Joel preaches in this sermon, "The light may never let us be, but it always takes us where we are and loves and envelops us right there."

So here I stand, broken but made whole, no longer in the darkness. God has dragged me kicking and screaming through the darkness to a new day. Joel's prayer that opens the book has become a daily source of meditation for me. I repeat his words over and over again, "I thank you that by your grace I am what I am...I promise to live always in your light and never return to the darkness." I am what I am. And I am in the light.