

O, the imagination of a new reborn boy  
but most of us settle on *alive*.

--Danez Smith, from "summer, somewhere"

In reading Joel R. Workin's essay "Overflowing," which uses the parable of the Prodigal as a springboard, I can't help but reflect on the times in my life when I was ready to say "No, period" when God had so much more, a "Yes, period" that I couldn't imagine or see. In rural Montana in the mid-1990s, it seemed that I could either choose my faith or my sexuality. Church and religion said that my sexuality was incidental so long as I remained celibate. If I didn't want to be celibate, then I could enter into reparative therapy to become heterosexual, or to *live into the true person God intended me to be*. In reflection, it is easy for me to see how the church's "No, period" was disguised as a "Yes, period." Don't you want to become the person God intended you to be? Don't you want to live life into your fullest capacity?

After years of struggle, I walked away from both the church and, I thought, from the Holy One. I hadn't yet learned the difference between the Merciful One's divine voice speaking to my spirit, and the voice of human religious institutions in the world. I had to tell the Loving One, "No, period," but the Loving One wasn't done with me. I had become the Prodigal who said to the church, give me my share and trouble me no more. I will make my own way in this life.

I thought I was alive, but I was only living. There were so many lessons that I needed to learn in the world, about love without restriction, about truth and authenticity, about community, courage, and resilience. I worked for equality. I struggled for social justice. I loved people to the best of my ability and made discoveries and mistakes in equal turns. Then I heard the voice of the Gentle One again, whispering *I have more life for you than you can possibly imagine*.

"But not even death will keep God from us," Workin writes, not even the death of my former faith. I've been through all of this already, I thought. "No, period" I told God. But the Loving One is as persistent as they are gentle. Our Creator, like the tide forever washing up on the shore, said again and again, "Yes, period."

What followed was the long period where I said "Maybe," dragging my feet as faithfully as possible. In my own call, there are/were so many twists and turns. As much heartbreak as there has been happiness. I often say that as it unfolds, it seems like a tragedy, but is actually a comedy in retrospect.

My critical mistake was in believing that the church's "No, period" was the Merciful One's voice speaking. Over time, over years, over the death of my old beliefs and the passing away of some of my new ones as well, God continues to say "Yes, period." "Yes, period" until even the church had to hear what the Righteous One demanded—that my sexuality, my gender, the way in which my Creator most intimately made me to be from the very beginning—was not something I needed to choose or reject, but simply live into. To become the true person God intended me to be. So too with my call.

The Faithful One is asking me to live into my call as a pastor, as both a witness and a welcome to all of those who have heard the church's "No, period," who have heard a congregation's, "No, period," or their family's "No, period" and mistaken it for the Loving One's voice. God is sending me to reassure all of those who have been wounded, been rejected, that this is not the voice of the Loving One. That God says from now on and forever, "Yes, period." That God, as Workin states, is an Easter that will not rest.

It is from this understanding of my call, that I see the need to repeat and repeat again God's "Yes, period" to the world, especially in such challenging and divisive times. The church where I serve as intern pastor is no exception. In calling me as their first openly LGBTQIA leader, some members left the church ahead of my arrival. When the council instituted a mask requirement for indoor worship, some members have refused to return to in-person worship until they can do so "freely" (without a mask).

The church is being called to live more fully into God's "Yes, period," a yes it has so often confused with conformity and tradition. A "yes," that for so long has meant, "Yes, just like me, period." So often, our polarization and divisiveness come from clinging to our old way of understanding and practicing that "yes." Our worship cannot be Lutheran worship unless it can adequately gather us all together, reveal our needs, feed us, and then send us all together into the world. But our old ways of being and doing are leading to stagnation, to a dwindling, and will eventually lead to the tomb. The church's insistence upon conformity, its clinging to the "way we have always done things" is killing it. The pandemic has only quickened this death, made the church's fears and frustrations more visible.

But the Living One's story does not end in a tomb.

Rather, God's "Yes, period" is one that calls us and the church out of the tomb, away from death, and into a new life. A life, which is Jesus' very own. Or as Workin says, "because the Love that has overflowed from God's own heart continues to find a home in us, too. Easter is a love that cannot rest..." This is the "Yes, period" that the Risen One intends for the church, especially now. A yes that binds up our divisiveness to gather in and then wipes away every tear through its sacrificial, abiding, and faithful love. But this is no easy work. No easy way to live.

Queer people's gift to the church is one of rupture and disorder. LGBTQIA people rupture the silence of what God's people fear to speak aloud and attempt to hide away. Ruptures our private spiritualities into a public faith. Ruptures the barrier that church walls have become and lets in the world. LGBTQIA people bring a gift of disruption, like the earthquake that came to Peter in prison, which lets us out of our prisons and into the world. A radical shaking up which show us that God is indeed present in real human bodies as well as outside of our churches and is the mud and mess of the world. Amid the trashiness, excess, sin, brokenness, riots, and revelry of our lives.

LGBTQIA people bring the gift of their own lives to God's people, lived out daily in authenticity and truth. Despite injustice. Despite oppression. Despite violence and death on a daily basis. Despite the world's continual "No, period." But as physician Dr. Gabor Maté says, "Safety is not the absence of threat...it is the presence of Connection."

It is in the truth, in the virtue of LGBTQIA people's lives lived in authenticity, that they find both their community and resilience. In our very existence, we discover and bear witness to God's people, to the overflowing love that wipes away every obstacle and opposition.

By our very breath, we show God's people, as God's people that it is possible to DANCE, when it seems the whole world we relied upon is burning down around us. When nothing seems certain. Even when it appears we are in the middle of the end. That in fact, God calls us to celebration and praise, and to dance and leap with joy at the end. Because it is not actually the end—is not death at all, but resurrection.

LGBTQIA people show that God's love has not been lost. That the Loving One has not gone down to the grave and remained. But is risen indeed. Has been returned like the coin that was lost and is indeed worthy of celebration, or Workin's toga party.

Queer people proclaim to the church again and again that the Love of God, Jesus, is going before us, is in fact already in our midst. That God's "Yes, period" is both in the present and forever. That our love is but one small part of that great overflowing, a love that gathers us all in, gathers us all together into the very kin-dom of God.