

# Prodigal Daughter:

## A Queer Christian's Open Letter to the Church

To my dear sister, the Church,

I celebrated my twenty-second birthday last month. As I blew out the candles, I wished for closure. This letter seems like the only way to reach you, to demand you grant my wish. I don't know if you'll respond, and I don't know if I care. Either way, I refuse to let you ignore my existence a second longer.

How have you been? Genuinely—I worry for the anger that feasts on your feral heart. Try as I might, the acid you spit at me still burns my skin. I can trace the scars, a roadmap of my journey through faith and sexuality. Did you notice the blisters on my lips? These are newer, not quite healed, born from the secrecy of my first kiss with a woman. Remember, too, how you scorched my hands? I finally let the girl occupying every corner of my mind interlock her fingers with mine. You yelled out the window of your car as you drove past us, screamed at your own sister. It's been so long that I nearly forgot the built-up scar tissue in my ears from the verses you belted at me.

Leviticus 20:13.

Romans 1:27.

1 Corinthians 6:9.

I was a child. Red ringlets in pigtails. Rosy cheeks. A *child*.

Do you remember when I was your favorite sibling? I don't think we could have been closer. We sat beside each other in the sanctuary each Sunday. We hung onto every word of Pastor Kenny's sermons. As kids, we were so close with him and his wife. I yearn for the simplicity of my younger years and the relationships we built together. The memories of how we laughed until our bellies hurt at youth group every Wednesday evening have never left me. You even came into my home each Friday for the bible study I led! We had so much fun. We were inseparable. Yet even then, we had a growing distance. You first felt it when I looked into the eyes of you and those girls and confessed that I struggled with lesbian pornography. Sitting there as a teenager, Kenny's sermons branded my thoughts with the word "abomination.". One when we went to our weekly youth group together, you even told me I wouldn't care that my gay older brother would burn in hell for his sexuality, tortured for all eternity, because I would be in heaven. There are no tears in heaven, no pain. I cried in front of you, and confusion was written all over your face. I cried for my brother. I cried for my uncles. I didn't know it then, but I cried for myself, too.

It has been so long. Those moments feel like a lifetime ago, yet they are etched into my mind and heart. When I began to first drift away from you, it was subtle. I switched churches. I became "too busy" for my high school ministry. I slept in on Sunday mornings. Still, I longed for something more. I craved a church that would flip tables in the temple. I spent countless days searching for sisters who would renounce the greed and evil of wealth. I looked tirelessly for a Christian community that fought to uplift the lepers and downtrodden: the addicts, the homeless, the oppressed. Our Father was calling me, the outcast, to him and his son as the spirit moved me to see your contradictions. I looked for our Father in the walls of numerous churches. Finally settling for the best I could find, I sat in my new church's gymnasium (having just left the second

sanctuary and upstairs arcade) confused. Most days of the week, this mansion of a church sat as empty as your heart. The stench of affluence made my stomach churn, vomit spewing on the brand-new hardwood floors as I retched. It is no wonder you began to cast me out when I questioned you. You are the bile that my stomach empties. Though my brain did not yet know it, my soul knew that you began to see me as the least of these. You finally saw my distance and smelt my queerness like a hound on the hunt.

It took me a little longer, though. I didn't notice that my sweaty palms and nervous stutter might not mean I want to be best friends with certain girls. I was a Christian. I was a *straight* Christian, just how God intended, just how you intended. It seemed as if I was in love with a new man every day. My chest tightened when the cashier with curly hair smiled at me as I checked out. Butterflies danced when the unfathomably tall and handsome man ran to hold the door open for me. A smile grew each time I passed the mysterious stranger I often saw on campus. Of course I had to be straight, right?

As I began to question my sexuality, the divide between us seemed larger than Goliath. I was David, both desperately attempting to conquer a giant and longing for Jonathan. You erase the latter, erase their queerness. In turn, you tried to erase mine. This enormous distance from you made it seem impossible to find our Father. Reaching out to him became more and more challenging. In questioning my sexuality, it became impossible to distinguish between the two of you.

I spent the first summer of my twenties hidden from you both. I began to hide from more than you, though. I locked myself away for *no one* to see. I kept my new question a secret. Am I bisexual? The word sharply twisted in my stomach and caught in my throat, unable to escape into the open air. When my roommates asked where I was heading, it was always to see a

“friend.” No need to worry and question me because it was always a female friend. A woman. A **friend**. I tried to tell myself this, too. Though I was no longer on speaking terms with you or our Father your words still resided in the darkest corners of my soul. Neither of you ever left my mind.

Did you hear that I spoke about you both as I looked up from the hips of the first girl I fucked, her taste still on my lips?

Despite how hard you tried, I could never separate my queerness from my faith. I tried, too. I pushed it down for twenty goddamn years. I suffocated those feelings, tried to make this attraction to women die a gruesome, painful death. It took me awhile, but I finally realized the truth you held from me. Like Lazarus, Jesus wept when my sexuality died. Like Lazarus, Jesus raised it from the dead and rejoiced.

Though Christ delighted in this process of coming out to myself, I abhorred it. I’m sure you remember my roommates at the time, devoutly Catholic. Even home felt unsafe. I was terrified of what they would say, of the possibility of losing my loved ones. Every night for months on end, I would escape to my car and drive down winding backroads. In my ’97 CRV, I screamed until my throat bled. I wept to the point of exhaustion. I prayed, asking our Father if he still loved me between the gasps of my sobs. “Am I an abomination?”

I thought no one could hear me. Our Father did.

You were the one I was most terrified to tell, and how right I was to be afraid. I’m sure you recall the night you whispered into the ear of my roommate's closest friend. In my own home, drunken words spilled from her lips about how she loved me, how she disagreed with my choices, and how I, a queer woman, am only capable of lust. As the liquor in her stomach called

her to the bathroom, I sat with my roommate until her words pierced the silence. “Would you still love me, still be my best friend if I felt the same as her?” Sister, you have stolen so much from me in the name of “love”: the safety of my home, one of my most beloved friends, peace. We never spoke of that night again.

You tried to convince me that you’d taken our Father, too. Unable to deny the truths of both my queerness and our faith, I had to believe in the God I walked away from, even if I thought he had first walked away from me. Pursuing one felt like a betrayal to the other, but denying the truth of both was and still is impossible. I saw your lies for the first time in the depth of the woman I loved, love that reflected our Father. Thinking I was thrown out with the slop of pigs, I had not visited our Father’s home for years. I thought my prayers never reached him, no matter how hard I tried. I believed he abandoned me to the bile in my soul, let my belly find its fill between the legs of women. You were wrong, sister. You lied to me. She craved no part of my body or anyone else’s. She desired the way my laughter filled a room. She was captivated by the fire behind my eyes. This love cleared the fog and lead me to truth, the depth of your deception. Our Father longed to see my face again. I was not forsaken.

I knew where I had to go. I had to see him.

From afar, our Father saw the matted, fiery locks of my hair. I began to fear that you had been honest and true all along, but dread fell to the wayside as our Father ran to me. I could taste his tears as he pressed his face to mine. He clothed me, fed me, and held me. He held a feast to tell our entire town of my return. Yet there you sat, sulking in the corner, desperate for our Father to throw me away. I’m not sure if our Father didn’t notice or didn’t care. We drank wine and danced until our feet bled. The prodigal daughter returned home.

Sister, do not forget that we are both daughters of Eve, sweet sin dripping from our lips. Though you try, you can never disown me. You can never take my inheritance. You can never cast me aside. I, too, am the Church. I am dust and divine.

From your discarded member and Sister,  
Kylee Phalen

## About the Author



Kylee Phalen was raised in East Tennessee and still calls Southern Appalachia her home. Despite being a queer woman surrounded by evangelical Christianity, she has kept her faith. Today, she is a member of the Episcopal Church and advocates for LGBTQIA+ affirming Christianity. She is now a senior at East Tennessee State University and is pursuing her Bachelor of Arts in English through an honors program. She plans to stay local and pursue medical school to become a safe and affirming physician. When Kylee isn't studying, you can find her on the Appalachian Trail.



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