

EMILY DICKINSON

A sermon series preached at
Plymouth Congregational Church of Minneapolis

by the Rev. James Gertmenian

Emily Dickinson

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EMILY DICKINSON: A Soul at the White Heat

A sermon preached at
Plymouth Congregational Church
1900 Nicollet Avenue
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55403

April 10, 2005

the Rev. James Gertmenian

**Text: Dickinson Poems
525, 1581, 401
Exodus 33:12-23**

On a summer night in the mid-nineteenth century, a major fire consumed half of the commercial section of Amherst, Massachusetts. Emily Dickinson, the reclusive adult daughter of the town's most prominent family heard the commotion from her bedroom only blocks away. The Dickinsons' younger daughter, Lavinia, wishing to shield her sister from concern, came to Emily's room "soft as a moccasin" and said, "Don't be afraid, Emily, it is only the 4th of July." Such irony. Emily hardly needed protecting. For in that household, or in that town, or in that era, for that matter, few knew fire as intimately as she. A burning building, after all, is one thing. A soul ablaze is much more threatening. For Emily Dickinson, the terrible fire of creativity had been burning since childhood, and secreted away in her room, where few were aware they existed, nearly 2000 poems marked the progress and reflected the light of that inner conflagration.

This congregation's emblem is a flame ("Freedom kindled by the flame of the Spirit"), and few individuals, I believe, embody the particular religious spirit and tenor of this place more than Emily Dickinson. She sought God quietly, passionately, all her life. Her approach was admittedly unorthodox (she once wrote, "Unless we become as Rogues we cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven."), and she held the doctrines and practices of the church under sometimes withering scrutiny, but this woman who described herself as "pugilist and poet" was consumed by the essential questions of faith. She never joined the church – stopped going altogether when she was thirty – but all through her life she stood attentively just outside the sanctuary, very near the threshold, and even today the light she casts in through the doorway often matches – or outshines – the light emanating from the most distinguished pulpits or the most thoughtful pews. The critic Harold Bloom claims that Dickinson's only religion was Emersonianism, a peculiarly American mixture of disparate influences that also underlies the writings of such artists as Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, and Wallace Stevens. That's grist for another mill. The fact is, it would be a travesty to try – even if success were possible – to co-opt Emily Dickinson for Christianity – to claim, patronizingly, that she was what she clearly was not – and besides, she stands her ground much too firmly to be budged. Yet still I claim her as a friend for all of us – in the church or beyond it – who are perpetually restless about the questions of God and

immortality, who find more life in wonderment than in certainty, and who, though satisfied in a thousand other ways, are still hungry for spiritual food.

It was more than a year ago that I had the idea of a series of sermons based on Emily Dickinson's poetry. I have been reading and thinking in preparation ever since then, and now I am faced with the frustrating dilemma of having only three thirty-minute cups into which can be poured the flood of enjoyment, awe, learning, and rumination that has risen up in me out of her work and life. But while I don't want to waste too many of those minutes on unnecessary introduction, I owe it to you and to the poet herself – to offer a disclaimer and a couple of acknowledgements.

First, I am not a Dickinson scholar. What I can bring to you are sermons, not lectures. Before the month is out, I will provide a bibliography for those who are interested in a more comprehensive view of her life and a more scholarly approach to her poems. My approach will be more devotional than didactic, more suppositional than systematic, and will deal more with impression than information. In particular, I am really compelled to leave out much by way of biography. I would only encourage us to open our minds beyond the popular characterizations of Dickinson, following the lead Adrienne Rich who wrote:

Narrowed down by her early editors and anthologists, reduced to quaintness or spinsterish oddity by many of her commentators, sentimentalized, fallen-in-love with like some gnostic Garbo, still unread in the breadth and depth of her full range of work, she was, and is, a wonder to me when I try to imagine myself into that mind.¹

At any rate, for those of you – and I know there are some in this congregation – who are better versed in Dickinson than I, I ask your forbearance and your openness to this more homiletic approach.

Second, the acknowledgements. In my reading, the touchstone book was Roger Lundin's *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*.² These sermons owe a great deal to that volume. I also want to thank all of those – especially Jo Holcomb and Barbara Kingsley, Sonia Thompson and Mary Laymon – who made our production of "The Belle of Amherst" possible. And I want to thank Katherine Ferrand for her beautiful reading of the Dickinson poems through this series.

And last, I need to say – this being National Poetry Month – that there are two people who have taught me to use poetry as an avenue for my own spiritual reflection. First, dear Bill Coffin, from whom I remember a sermon in which he asked, with sumptuous incredulity: "Can you imagine that there actually are people in the world who don't read a poem a day?" And, of course, there is my wife, Sam – who will be offering two lectures on Dickinson later in the month – and whose patience with my more prosaic nature and my more circumscribed spirituality these thirty-three years is still to me a daily astonishment.

+ + + +

In 1850, when Emily Dickinson was twenty years old, a religious revival embered up in Amherst, Massachusetts, where the poet's family had lived for decades. This was not the

ecstatic type of revival in which there are loud emotional appeals and frenzied responses, but a gentler, more sober phenomenon, a slow warming, appropriate to the Whig culture of the place and time. Such was the revival's power, nevertheless, that Emily's stern father, Edward, her sister, Lavinia, and her beloved friend, Susan Gilbert, later to become her sister-in-law, were all swept up by the movement and, confessing their allegiance to Christ, became members of the Congregational Church. Alone in her circle, Emily held back. As she had done three years before when similar pressures came to bear at Mount Holyoke where she was a student, Emily resisted the tide and did not become a professing Christian. But hers was no obstinate resistance, nor was it a categorical refusal. She wrote, at the time, describing those who had responded more positively to the revival: "They seem so very tranquil, and their voices are kind, and gentle, and the tears fill their eyes so often, I really think I envy them."

This little lament represents more than a wistfulness about the comforts of social conformity ... more, even, than a hope that she might acquire the peaceful affect that she found in those who had been "saved." At its heart, her comment gives voice to a longing that welled up in Emily Dickinson all through her life, a never-fulfilled desire for firm confidence in the presence of a loving, attentive God. It would be wrong, I think, to suggest that she had great doubts about God's existence; rather, she wondered, famously, whether this God were near enough or personal enough to be at all useful. The cold, distant, disinterested God of the Deists was not sufficient for her. With many of the Romantics, she sought comfort, warmth, presence and, significantly, reassurance in the face of death, that mystery which most consumed her from her youth on. Her frustrated desire for this more personal God – particularly in the face of death – is clear in this poem (#1581) in which she does not argue about God's existence but laments God's absence or impotence by picturing God with an amputated hand.

Those—dying then,
Knew where they went—
They went to God's Right Hand—
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found—

The abdication of Belief
Makes the Behavior small—
Better an ignis fatuus
Than no illume at all— [#1581]

"Those—dying then," in other words, believers who went before her, had certain faith. They "knew where they went—" But no longer. Now "God cannot be found—" But if the only point of the poem were to bemoan an absent God, a God with an amputated hand, the piece would be flat, ordinary. Dickinson goes beyond that. She remembers that life cannot be significant, grand, ennobled without belief in something beyond us. "The abdication of Belief" she writes, "Makes the behavior small—" and most of us know this intuitively; without the context of transcendence, without a sense that the material world is grounded in or saturated with something more than itself, behavior becomes "small," trivialized. The recently deceased Pope, whether you agreed with him or not, was not small but enormous in stature, precisely because he was grounded in transcendence, in God. Otherwise he would have been simply another man with political power and provocative ideas. If everything is all just atoms, who can ultimately

make a case for the moral life? So, the power in the poem is not just in its confession that God seems absent, or disabled, but in its awareness of how tragic that is, of how much is lost in a world where God's hand is amputated. "The abdication of Belief/Makes the behavior small—" And then, to drive the point still deeper, she says that even an elusive faith – an *ignis fatuus*, something like a will-o-the-wisp – is better, "than no illume at all." So, here is a poem that does not blink in the face of God's seeming absence at times in our lives ... yet still claims for us the importance of our struggle for faith, the significance of our search for God. Listen to it again:

Those—dying then,
Knew where they went—
They went to God's Right Hand—
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found—

The abdication of Belief
Makes the Behavior small—
Better an *ignis fatuus*
Than no illume at all—

This struggle – this epic tension – between a sense of God's presence and God's absence, between an intuitive apprehension of the reality of God and a rationalist concern that God was somehow uninvolved – was, in Emily Dickinson, a catalyst for great creativity. This was not the gentle prodding of a benign muse but a crucible-like experience, a life-long, active, sometimes painful questioning which gave rise to some of the most powerful poetry in the English language. One might compare it to Jesus' struggle in Gethsemane, or his cry of dereliction from the cross, or, as in the reading from Exodus this morning, the urgent desire of Moses to see God, even if the only result is to see God's back. We are not all poets, to be sure, but it seems to me that the truly creative soul-work of our lives happens not in that place where faith is certain, nor in that place where faith has been certainly discarded but in the liminal, threshold space between the two. If I could say only one thing in all the preaching I ever did in this pulpit, it would be to call you into that place of tension, that place of creativity – because that's where revelation happens.

Nor is the experience on the cusp of faith and doubt always one that tips toward the latter. Sometimes on that fulcrum of the spirit, the movement is toward faith. Listen:

God grows above—so those who pray
Horizons—must ascend—
And so I stepped upon the North
To see this Curious Friend—

His House was not—no sign had He—
By Chimney—nor by Door—
Could I infer his Residence—
Vast Prairies of Air

Unbroken by a Settler—
Were all that I could see—

Infinitude—Had'st Thou no Face

That I might look on Thee?

The Silence condescended—
Creation stopped—for me—
But awed beyond my errand—
I worshipped—did not “pray”— [#525]

In this poem, Dickinson describes an instance of awe that is not confined by religion, nor by church, but is something more than both of those. The poem begins with her making an attempt at prayer as a way of finding God. But she cannot achieve her quarry, she cannot find God, by her own lights: “His House was not—no sign had He—/By Chimney—nor by Door—Could I infer his residence—” This leads to a sense of frustration and she speaks to God: “Infinitude—Had'st Thou no Face/That I might look on Thee?” Here is Moses' request again – to see God's face – and which of us has not asked the same thing at one point or another? Enough of wondering! I've studied, waited, pondered, prayed. Let me see! But here the tension yields an unexpected boon, a gift, for instead of the poet finding God, God finds her. “The silence condescended—/Creation stopped—for me—” much as the Samaritan stopped for the man in the ditch. Have you ever had a moment like that – even one, brief moment? “The silence condescended—/Creation stopped—for me—” In that moment, you see, you know. And when it happens, it breaks open the bounds of religion or of church, so there is a wonderful truth-telling in the last line “I worshipped—did not ‘pray.’” “Pray,” here, particularly as Dickinson has it, cooped up in quotation marks, signifies an activity that is formal, perhaps even slightly artificial. Prayer, in that more circumscribed sense, is what she had set out to do in the beginning of the poem. That was how she was going to find God. But in the end, her attempt is subverted by grace, and she is overtaken by something that is much bigger, more natural, more elemental: “I worshipped—did not ‘pray.’” Praying – at least in this poem – is a piece of religion. Worship (she is not referring to church services here) transcends religion. Worship is life. Worship is a natural, unencumbered, unfettered flow between the transcendent and the everyday, between God and human.

Once again:

God grows above—so those who pray
Horizons—must ascend—
And so I stepped upon the North
To see this Curious Friend—

His House was not—no sign had He—
By Chimney—nor by Door—
Could I infer his Residence—
Vast Prairies of Air

Unbroken by a Settler—
Were all that I could see—
Infinitude—Had'st Thou no Face
That I might look on Thee?

The Silence condescended—
Creation stopped—for me—
But awed beyond my errand—
I worshipped—did not “pray”—

One question we might ask is: “When do religion, church, ‘prayer’ prevent true worship from happening, and when do they enable it?” For I would not have you leave today thinking that I am mounting an argument against all of this and what we do in this place. I am only saying that all of this is penultimate and that its purpose is not itself but to make us ready for, make us open to, make us aware of the reality of God which is trying to break into our lives. The church, at its best, can do that work. If, however, the forms become constricting, the belief systems limiting, the traditions an end unto themselves, then we, with Dickinson must critique the church and stand free of its weight.

I won’t take time to examine our third poem today, but simply to draw things together around that wonderful image in the first line: “a Soul at the White Heat.” It’s really at the heart of what I mean to say today out of the work of this amazing “pugilist and poet.” She asks us: Why wish for a soul that has cooled into religious certainty? On the other side, why accept a soul that has lost its fire to the cold resignation of un-faith? It is in the tugging between the two where real life lies. As she wrote, late in her life: “On subjects of which we know nothing, or should I say *Beings*, we both believe and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble.” What Emily Dickinson models for us is a soul white hot with yearning and disappointment and joy and struggle and awe and grief and wonder. White hot, and therefore dangerous. White hot, and therefore creative, like the imagination that erupted in the big bang. White hot, where all is still forming, heavy with surprise. White hot, which is agony and bliss combined. Life, of course, must have its times of comfort and quiet and settled rest. No one would deny these. But lest we fall asleep and freeze to death, we do well to rub together the sticks of belief and unbelief, confidence and doubt, hope and resignation, and so produce the spark, the kindling, the flame, the blaze, the white heat of faith.

Next week, we’ll look at Emily Dickinson’s reflections on Jesus. You may be surprised!

¹“Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson,” from *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* by Adrienne Rich. Copyright 1979 by W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

²Lundin, Roger, *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004, 318 pp.

Note: Citations to the poetry of Emily Dickinson are based on the edition of R.W. Franklin published in 1998. The poems are numbered as they are in the Franklin text.

**EMILY DICKINSON:
Jesus, the Tender Pioneer**

A sermon preached at
Plymouth Congregational Church
1900 Nicollet Avenue
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55403

April 17, 2005

the Rev. James Gertmenian

**Text: Dickinson Poems
1459, 615, 727
Philippians 2:1-11**

The announcement, made earlier this week, that the majority leader of the United States Senate is joining an effort to brand as “anti-faith” all those who oppose his party’s stance on the filibuster and judicial appointments, should be of concern to every member of the religious community: Republican and Democrat, evangelical and liberal, Christian, Muslim, Jew. The issue here is not the filibuster itself, or even the particular judicial appointments being considered, important as those are. People may appropriately disagree on these questions. The real issue is the presumption of a government official claiming for his party exclusive possession of the mantle of religion. No one – senator or otherwise – has the wisdom, the authority, or the right to suggest that disagreement with him constitutes a failure of religious faith. That someone of such high position would do this should set off alarm bells for all those – of every political stripe – who value the free exercise of religion, the tradition of civil debate, and the notion that God’s truth is not subject to capture by any group, party, or nation. The First Amendment to the Constitution – which will be celebrated in the fourth embroidery now being worked on by our Needlers – is too important a gift not to be guarded carefully. I urge you to do what your conscience dictates in responding to the senator’s decision.

On a somewhat lighter note, it was reported to me a few days ago that one of my colleagues at a large downtown Minneapolis church – a good friend – said this publicly, and good-naturedly: “The difference between our church and Plymouth Church is that when we start a meeting, we begin with prayer. At Plymouth, they start with a poem.” I beg to disagree. The difference is that here at Plymouth we rejoice in the fact that prayer and poetry are often the same thing. There is no bright line that divides them into two species. Rather, they frequently share the same bloodline: prayer, pulsing with poetry’s cadences and language; poetry, flush with prayer’s spirit. What’s more, here at Plymouth, we recognize that poetry doesn’t have to be religious to be prayerful any more than prayer has to rhyme to be poetic. Ask any one of the thousand people who packed this sanctuary on Monday night to hear Ted Kooser, the US Poet Laureate. So, enough with these arbitrary distinctions! If it rises from the soul – truly rises from the soul – the chances are good that it is both prayer and poetry.

So. I got that out of my system! Today, we continue with the second of three sermons drawn from the poetry of Emily Dickinson – someone who, as I inferred last week, might well be considered a “patron saint” of this church because of her passionate though unorthodox approach to questions about God, faith, and religion. Last week’s installment located Dickinson in that liminal, white-hot space between certainty and doubt and proposed that that is where faith is most often found. Next week, to conclude, we’ll listen to the Amherst poet as she struggles with the twin subjects that consumed her through much of her life: death and immortality. This week, though, we turn to her understanding of Jesus of Nazareth, a figure to whom she was profoundly drawn.

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As I said last week, Emily Dickinson struggled mightily with the idea of God. It was not so much that she doubted God’s existence as that she lamented God’s distance, God’s absence, God’s apparent lack of interest in humankind. At turns, for Dickinson, God seemed to have an “amputated hand,” or be a “distant, stately lover” but then would “condescend” unbidden to startle her into awestruck worship. She wrote:

I know that he exists.
Somewhere—in silence—
He has hid his rare life
From our gross eyes. (#365)

In any case, certainty about God’s presence and care eluded her, so she lived in the “white heat” of the questions all through her life. You may or may not agree, but my suggestion last week was that the condition of “white heat,” – the tension between certainty and doubt – while not the most comfortable circumstance in which to live, is, in fact, the true territory of faith. As she said, “Too much of proof affronts Belief.”

Dickinson wondered a great deal about God, and it was generally a dark wondering. She referred to God once as an “eclipse” whom others referred to as “Father.” By contrast, in Jesus of Nazareth, the poet found some of the warmth, personality, closeness, and compassion that she could not find in the Creator, the Father, the first person of the Godhead. Her view of Jesus was certainly not such as to make her into any kind of orthodox Christian, but at the same time, she found it difficult to take her eye off this “gentle Pioneer” for long. Something in Jesus drew her, fascinated her, assured her, warmed her. As Roger Lundin writes: “If God the Father was often her foe, God the Son was her trustworthy friend.”¹ “Trustworthy” is the operative word there, for Dickinson’s real complaint about God was she could never be sure where – or whether – God could be found. Jesus, though, was a different story. Jesus was strong, and brave, and stable, and reliable, and, because he was a human being, *present*. Emily Dickinson’s life spanned the time when Charles Darwin was publishing his seismic discoveries and Biblical scholars were developing the historical-critical method that pulled the rug out from under a literal reading of scripture. It was a time when the faith of many was being shaken. In such a time, Jesus became, for Dickinson, the one who, alone, could make sense of belief. Listen to this poem, #1459, which came late in her life:

How brittle are the Piers
On which our Faith doth tread—
No Bridge below doth totter so—
Yet none hath such a Crowd.
It is as old as God—
Indeed—‘twas built by him—
He sent His Son to test the Plank—
And he pronounced it firm. (#1459)

The poet imagines Faith as a walk across a bridge whose piers are brittle. You can see the spindly pieces of wood, and if you have ever felt your faith shake within you, or waver, or begin to fail, you know what she meant in describing the bridge this way. Rationalism, empirical experience, and the scientific developments I just described, make the piers seem brittle and yet, as she says, no bridge has ever had to hold such a crowd of people, for everyone is seeking the assurances, the consolations of faith. How do you know that the faith will hold you up? How do you know, when you suffer loss, or fear, or exhaustion? How do you know that the bridge is reliable? You know, Dickinson says, because “[God] sent His Son to test the Plank—And he pronounced it firm.” In other words, Jesus lived in the same condition we do, having to cross the same bridge, with many of the same temptations of doubt. But in his faithfulness, even to death, he made it across and “pronounced [the bridge] firm.” Significantly, for Dickinson, Jesus’ role is not the innocent victim sacrificed for the sins of others ... but the leader who goes across the questionable bridge first – ahead of everyone else – to show that it will hold. Listen again:

How brittle are the Piers
On which our Faith doth tread—
No Bridge below doth totter so—
Yet none hath such a Crowd.
It is as old as God—
Indeed—‘twas built by him—
He sent His Son to test the Plank—
And he pronounced it firm. (#1459)

It is, of course, not just life that causes us to quake, but death, too, and for Dickinson, death was a constant theme. As I said, we’ll look more at that subject next week, but this next poem shows Dickinson’s sense that Jesus’ role of going before us, testing the way, doesn’t apply only to the fears we have in this life.

Life—is what we make it—
Death—We do not know—
Christ’s acquaintance with Him—
Justify Him—though—

He—would trust no stranger—
Other—could betray—
Just His own endorsement—
That—sufficeth Me—

All the other Distance
He hath traversed first—
No new mile remaineth—
Far as Paradise—

His sure foot preceding—
Tender Pioneer—
Base must be the Coward
Dare not venture—now— (#727)

Here, Dickinson pictures Jesus – the “tender Pioneer” – going into death ahead of us in order to give us courage. We know something of life, she says, but death is hidden from us. However, “Christ’s acquaintance with Him,” – that is, with Death – gives him authority ... and gives us confidence. There isn’t one mile between here and Paradise that Jesus hasn’t already walked – “No new mile remaineth—” and so, with Jesus as leader and companion, one would have to be a base coward not to venture forth. This is a very different Jesus from the one whose death is required as an expiation for our sins. This Jesus does not go through death for us, or instead of us, but ahead of us, to show the way and to keep our hearts steady. In a sense, then, in true Emersonian fashion, Dickinson describes a Jesus who does not save us by virtue of his unique divinity but who saves us by exciting in us our own divinity. A pioneer is not one who goes off into the wilderness to live by himself but one who blazes a trail where others may follow. So, again:

Life—is what we make it—
Death—We do not know—
Christ’s acquaintance with Him—
Justify Him—though—

He—would trust no stranger—
Other—could betray—
Just His own endorsement—
That—sufficeth Me—

All the other Distance
He hath traversed first—
No new mile remaineth—
Far as Paradise—

His sure foot preceding—
Tender Pioneer—
Base must be the Coward
Dare not venture—now—

So, for Dickinson, Jesus was a moral and existential exemplar, one who forged the way in which we may follow. In particular, she felt that human beings could relate to Jesus – that *she* could relate to Jesus – because like us, he suffered. “I like a look of Agony,” she wrote, “because I know it’s true.”

But the question of the day – and I think that it is a question that touches many in this church – is this: Is it enough for Jesus to be “moral and existential exemplar?” The Romantic poets – and here we must include Dickinson – reacted to the sterility of orthodoxy by emphasizing the humanity of Jesus, including his suffering. That, too, is the tendency among liberal Christians, including many of us at Plymouth. But is it enough? Is it enough for Jesus simply to be one of us, one who knows and shares our condition? For some of you, it may be. For others, there is a desire for another dimension to Jesus, a connection to the transcendent God. For you, he is not just a great teacher; he is something more. Where does your heart take you? How do you think about these things?

On this question, Emily Dickinson is something of an enigma. And I’ll leave you, today, with the question hanging there – fruit for your own picking and your own nourishment – and with one last poem, slightly satiric, yet with a hint of longing in it. In the poem Dickinson uses Longfellow’s “The Courtship of Miles Standish” as the metaphor. You remember that Standish was in love with Priscilla, but instead of approaching her in person, he sent John Alden as his proxy to ask for her hand. Dickinson here pictures God, from afar, sending Jesus – just as Standish sent Alden – to win the hand of humanity.

God is a distant—stately Lover—
Woos, as He states us—by His Son—
Verily, a Vicarious Courtship—
“Miles”, and “Priscilla,” were such an One—

The problem was that Priscilla cared more for John Alden – the messenger – than for Miles Standish – the one sending the message. And so we have the famous line, “Speak for yourself, John.” What happens, Dickinson wonders, if people become so wound up with Jesus – as Priscilla did with Alden – that they forget God who sent him?

But lest the Soul—like fair “Priscilla”
Choose the Envoy—and spurn the ’Groom—
Vouches, with hyperbolic archness—
“Miles”, and “John Alden” are Synonyme. (#615)

One can’t quite tell whether she means it when she says that “‘Miles’, and ‘John Alden’ [that is, God and Jesus] are Synonyme.” As I said, there is a satiric feel to the poem, but you can’t help but hear a wistfulness in it, as well, a hint of longing. Or maybe it is our own longing that we hear. At any rate, it’s a good question for you to go home with. Who is Jesus for you? Are Jesus and God “synonyme?” If so, how?

Emily Dickinson had surely read – many times – the ancient hymn found in Paul’s letter to the Philippians:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
 did not regard equality with God
 as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
 taking the form of a slave,
 being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death—
 even death on a cross.

⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him
 and gave him the name
 that is above every name,
¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus
 every knee should bend,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue should confess
 that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 to the glory of God the Father.

Those words challenged her ... and she challenged them back. It was that holy, visceral, and utterly honest conversation – between her own heart and the heart of the tradition – that made her life incandescent. May the same light – and the same spirit – be found in you and in me.

Amen.

¹ Lundin, Roger, *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*, Grand Rapids, MI, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1998, 318 pp.

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EMILY DICKINSON: This World Is Not Conclusion

A sermon preached at
Plymouth Congregational Church
1900 Nicollet Avenue
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55403

April 24, 2005

the Rev. James Gertmenian

**Text: Dickinson Poems
373, 720, 448
I Corinthians 15**

We come, today, to the end of a series of sermons rising out of the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Our month-long celebration of Dickinson concludes tomorrow night with Sam King's second lecture, beginning at 7:00 p.m. I want to thank Sam for taking this on, and I want to thank Katherine Ferrand again for her exquisite readings of the poems each week. Too, I want to express my appreciation to Philip and our soloists and choir for giving us such beautiful musical settings of the Dickinson poetry. Mostly, I want to thank all of you for your good comments, your questions, your suggestions ... and simply for being a congregation that is open to an experience like this. By the way, there were some requests for a bibliography. You'll find copies today in the narthex, in Guild Hall, and in the Church Office. Copies will be available tomorrow evening as well.

Dickinson herself, of course, would have found it ironic that while she could never bring herself to join a church or profess herself a Christian, we are here, using her poetry to inform and enrich our worship. So let me reiterate that my aim this month has not been to co-opt her for some sort of orthodoxy, or even for Christianity broadly construed, but only to give thanks for Dickinson's voice and to give thanks, as well, that people need not be of the same religious convictions or beliefs to enrich one another spiritually. One might even say that conversation between people of disparate faiths, or among those who have differing ways of *doing* faith is as sure a sign as we have of the presence of God. Sadly, this fact appears to be lost on our current leaders in Congress, who are mired in the conceit that any opposition to their policies represents an assault on faith, and who seem, therefore, to have missed two central articles of any mature belief system: first, that God is quite capable of speaking more than one language and second, that God cannot be held captive to a particular political ideology. Some difficult days lie ahead if our leaders persist in their dangerous thinking.

I must confess to you today that in regard to Emily Dickinson, there is so much more that I would like to bring you than is possible in three sermons. I feel like the Quaker painter Edward Hicks, whose life, incidentally, overlapped with Dickinson's by twenty years. Hicks, you'll

recall, painted the same scene – The Peaceable Kingdom, in which lions and lambs lie down together – over a hundred times, and it occurs to me that even a hundred sermons would not be enough to exhaust the springs of insight and truth that well up in Dickinson’s poetry. So, while the series ends today with some attention to the poet’s ideas about death and immortality, I think you can count on her name – and her work – cropping up with some frequency in my sermons in the months and years ahead. If it gets to be too much, I trust you’ll gently invite me to curb my enthusiasm.

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When Emily Dickinson was in her late teens, her father employed a young law clerk, named Benjamin Newton. The two became fast friends, and Newton is credited with being among the first people to encourage Emily in her poetic endeavors. When, after a brief time, he left Amherst to return to his home in Worcester, the friends began writing to one another, but their correspondence was short-lived because before long, the young man died of tuberculosis. Emily was 23 at the time, and she wrote to Ben Newton’s minister in Worcester – the famous Edward Everett Hale – asking whether her friend’s last hours were cheerful, and continuing: “Please, Sir – to tell me if he was willing to die, and ... I should love so much to know certainly, that he was today in Heaven.” Years later, she wrote of Ben Newton again, saying, “When a little Girl, I had a friend, who taught me Immortality – but venturing too near, himself – he never returned.”¹

All through her life and in major portions of her poetry, Emily Dickinson wrestled with the twin themes – death and immortality – and this was not simply an intellectual or artistic exercise. Beginning with the loss of Ben Newton, death frequently intruded on her family and her circle of friends, and when the Civil War erupted, and the muffled drums of death became the nation’s daily dirge, she, along with her neighbors, had regularly to take account of human fragility and mortality. The losses were personal and deep for Dickinson, and her intellectual and spiritual acuity prevented her from taking easy comfort in the nostrums of the day. For Dickinson, death was an ontological question – she approached it at its very base: why did death have to exist at all, and what is its meaning? Inured, even in her reclusive state, of life and nature and the joys of this world – she alternated between “melancholy disenchantment and angry disbelief”² that any of it had to end, and she resisted the idea that there could be any world better than this. With characteristic wit, she wrote to one friend in 1856, “... if God had been here this summer, and seen the things that *I* have seen – I guess that He would think His Paradise superfluous.”

In her rebellion against death, Dickinson ran crosswise to many of her Romantic contemporaries, and it’s important here for us to acknowledge the connections between Romanticism and our own liberal theological tradition. The cultural approach to death in the 19th century was to dull its edge, to blur the lines between this life and whatever other life there might be, and, often, to use sentimentality to cushion the blow that death delivered. The development, during this period, of the rural cemetery movement (it began at Mt. Auburn cemetery in Cambridge, and our own Lakewood here in Minneapolis is a prime example) grew out of a romantic sensibility which tried to make death bucolic, pastoral, even pleasant. Here,

Dickinson, dissented – in her soul, in her bones, in her words. For instance, in poem #448, “I died for Beauty,” there is a dark, uncompromising, boldness – staring death in the face – that gives not one inch to romantic fuzziness. In the poem she imagines herself in her casket in the ground conversing with another lying near her in the ranks of the dead. Listen:

I died for Beauty—but was scarce
Adjusted in the Tomb
when One who died for Truth, was lain
In an adjoining Room—

He questioned softly “Why I failed”?
“For Beauty”, I replied—
“And I—for Truth—Themselves are One—
We Brethren, are”, He said—

And so as Kinsmen, met a Night—
We talked between the Rooms—
Until the Moss had reached our lips—
And covered up—Our names— (#448)

The conversation is about what matters in life. The other asks Dickinson why she “failed,” – that is, died – and she says that she had given her life for Beauty, as indeed she did. Her companion replies that in his life, it was Truth that mattered, and he acknowledges that the two are intimately related. “We Brethren, are”, He said—” You can hear in this, of course, an echo of Keats:

‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’ — that is all

Ye need to know on earth, and all ye need to know.

At first there seems something almost uplifting about this ghostly colloquy, something noble in the two who have died in the service of Truth and Beauty. In the last stanza, even, Dickinson draws us into a feeling bordering on hope, imagining this conversation continuing into eternity:

And so as Kinsmen, met a Night—

We talked between the Rooms—

so the reader feels poised on the brink of some great affirmation, when Dickinson lets the trap door fall from under us with the last couplet which essentially says that everything ends, that the conversation could go only so far, only:

Until the Moss had reached our lips—
And covered up—Our names—

The moss silences the voices even of those allied with Truth and Beauty, and their names do not live on but are “covered up” by the creeping of natural forces. The utter honesty of a poem like

this – Dickinson’s willingness to see death for everything it is in its full darkness – is hard for us, but it gives greater depth to her other poems on immortality which do not end so darkly. (Note, too, how Dickinson eschews the easy and predictable rhyme at the end – “Tombs” could go so easily with “rooms” – but she chooses the word “names” in order to jar the ear a bit and, more importantly, to make the power of death so much more personal. Death, in the end, she laments, even takes away our names, our very identity.)

The need, first, to face death’s finality in order to move, later, to a more hopeful place comes up for clergy again and again when we work with families who have lost a loved one and are planning a memorial service. “We just want a celebration of her life,” they will say, and in some cases, they’ll go so far as to say, “It should be a happy service – no sad music, no tearful eulogies.” Well, you can understand where they’re coming from, and you can agree that an element of joy should be found in every memorial service, but you need to say, “I know what you’re looking for, but we probably can’t get to the joy – not the real joy – unless we can first acknowledge the sadness, the loss, the finality of death.” My thesis here – a thesis that is more homiletic than scholarly – is that the power of Dickinson’s poems about immortality derive from the fact that she turned away from the Romantic domestication of death. Death, she tells us, is everything it’s cracked up to be, and, as she said in a letter: “to relieve the irreparable degrades it.” So:

I died for Beauty—but was scarce
Adjusted in the Tomb
when One who died for Truth, was lain
In an adjoining Room—

He questioned softly “Why I failed”?
“For Beauty”, I replied—
“And I—for Truth—Themselves are One—
We Brethren, are”, He said—

And so as Kinsmen, met a Night—
We talked between the Rooms—
Until the Moss had reached our lips—
And covered up—Our names—

Because she faced its stark reality, Dickinson’s desire to know what – if anything – lies *beyond* death was all the more compelling. “I should love so much to know certainly,” she wrote of Ben Newton, “that he was today in Heaven.” You may recall from last week’s sermon that Jesus was an important figure for her in all of this; by traversing death ahead of us, by showing the way, Jesus became the “gentle Pioneer” who makes possible a passage that would otherwise cause us to shrink in fear.

And when the fear came over her – as it often did – Dickinson wrote about immortality as a way of coping. In an 1862 letter, she reported to her preceptor, Thomas Higginson: “I had a terror — since September — I could tell to none — and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground — because I am afraid —”³ This image of her “whistling by the graveyard” trying to keep her spirits up, is endearing to us, because only the coldest of hearts or the dullest of minds will not admit to sharing the same fears from time to time.

So she sang. She sang of immortality, though she could never be sure of it. And what singing! Here – with no apology for repeating a poem I used only a year ago in a sermon – is as encouraging a vision as I know:

This World is not conclusion,
A Species stands beyond—
Invisible, as Music—
But positive, as Sound—

There *is* something beyond, she asserts, even through her fear. After all, we cannot see music, but no one doubts that sound exists. There is another world – which for all we know may be folded inside this one – and it by turns draws us closer but keeps us at bay,

It beckons, and it baffles—

and though our learning and our wisdom can't open it to us, still we are fascinated by it, yearn for it, are even willing to suffer for it:

It beckons, and it baffles—
Philosophy, don't know—
And through a Riddle, at the last—
Sagacity, must go—
to guess it, puzzles scholars
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
and Crucifixion, shown—

Even faith isn't quite enough to secure it for us. We think we're so sure, and then our faith slips – as on a banana peel – and we laugh at ourselves and get up, blushing in case anyone has seen us. We grab at any straw for evidence, and we even look for directions from a weather vane – that goes with every shift of the wind:

Faith slips—and laughs, and rallies—
Blushes, if any see—
Plucks at a twig of Evidence—
And asks a Vane, the way—

And lest you thought that you could get any help from a preacher, Dickinson punctures that balloon, too, and leaves us with an image that says there is no drug, no religious opiate, no mind-numbing diversion that can make our ultimate longing go away.

Much Gesture, from the pulpit—
Strong Hallelujahs roll—
Narcotics cannot still the tooth
that nibbles at the soul— (#373)

Hear it all together, and stand, with me, in awe of the courage of this woman who with hope and humor, with artistry and passion, rose above her fears to affirm the power of life over death.

This World is not conclusion,
A Species stands beyond—
Invisible, as Music—
But positive, as Sound—
It beckons, and it baffles—
Philosophy, don't know—
And through a Riddle, at the last—
Sagacity, must go—
to guess it, puzzles scholars
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
and Crucifixion, shown—
Faith slips—and laughs, and rallies—
Blushes, if any see—
Plucks at a twig of Evidence—
And asks a Vane, the way—
Much Gesture, from the pulpit—
Strong Hallelujahs roll—
Narcotics cannot still the tooth
that nibbles at the soul—

Finally, in poem #720 – one of her most positive about immortality – Dickinson offers an undulating, timeless image which confirms that beyond our mortal sight there is a reality that is eternal. This lovely poem pierces the veil, briefly, and without being unnecessarily descriptive, draws us into that other realm.

As if the Sea should part
And show a further Sea—
And that—a further—and the Three
But a Presumption be—

Of Periods of Seas—
Unvisited of Shores—
Themselves the Verge of Seas to be—
Eternity—is Those— (#720)

“As if the Sea should part,” of course, recalls Moses and the people of Israel and implies that, like them, we are captive in this material world until by some miraculous movement (I would argue that her poem *is* that miracle) a breach is made and we go forth into freedom. But Dickinson takes the historical image of the Exodus and lifts it to the mystical by supposing that beyond the first parted sea there is another one, and beyond that still another. And, as if that were not enough, she says that all three of these seas – all three of these movements into freedom – are but a presumption of something still greater. The poem works if you will let

yourself be drawn into these successive openings, if you will imagine that there are depths in you that you haven't even begun to plumb, that there are realities in the world that you haven't even begun to see, that there are truths in the universe that you haven't even begun to know. What I love about this poem is that she doesn't presume to describe Heaven as do some of our wooden, literalist theologies. She doesn't say, "Now we're here, and then we're going to be there," as if it were as simple as a trip to the next town. Instead, her image is of opening after opening, like a picture within a picture within a picture, on to infinity. She would blush to hear it, but I feel the same about Emily Dickinson's poetry: it keeps opening up, wave after wave, truth after truth, as if it would never end. This sermon, though, needs to end – and our series as well, so instead of a grand closing statement of my own, which would surely fail, let me leave you with a last reading of this little poem which draws us, essentially, even as we think about the finality of death, into a dimension of reality that never ends, where every shore leads to another sea, and that, to a sea beyond:

As if the Sea should part
And show a further Sea—
And that—a further—and the Three
But a Presumption be—

Of Periods of Seas—
Unvisited of Shores—
Themselves the Verge of Seas to be—
Eternity—is Those—

Amen.

¹ Lundin, Roger, *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*, Grand Rapids, MI, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1998, pg. 77-78.

² *Ibid.* pg. 29.

³ Todd, Mabel Loomis, ed., *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003, pg. 253.

Note: Citations to the poetry of Emily Dickinson are based on the edition of R.W. Franklin published in 1998. The poems are numbered as they are in the Franklin text.