



# Praying with the Poets

T.S. Eliot \* Mary Oliver \* Emily Dickinson \* Langston Hughes \* Tagore  
Maya Angelo \* Jane Kenyon \* Dylan Thomas \* Rumi \* Wendell Berry  
Thomas Traherne \* Scott Cairns

Community Christian Church – 4601 Main Street – Kansas City Missouri  
**Session #3 – Emily Dickinson**

**Emily Dickinson** – Amherst, Massachusetts native, educated at Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke, reclusive and private publisher of fewer than a dozen poems during her lifetime (1830-1886), cultivator of “correspondence friendships,” influenced by Emerson, Thoreau, Dickens, and Ruskin, convert to Christianity at age 15, churchless by age 22, author of more than 1800 poems – never knew fame for her verse during her lifetime. Posthumously, her poetry experienced only lukewarm and negative recognition until 1955 when a complete collection of her work was published. Known affectionately in the literary world as “the Belle of Amherst,” she wrote poetry that was irregular in form and thematically concerned with eternity, death, and human mutability. Her poetry would eventually win legendary acclaim for its innovation, ingenuity, lyricism, and powerful imagery, and, along with Walt Whitman’s influence, help shape poetry in the U.S. into a truly American idiom.

**Day #1: The Slanted Truth** – Instead of the direct formalism of her predecessors, who followed what we might deem a more stilted and directly didactic style, Dickinson preferred a more allusive and indirect approach. For her, poetic communication (and we might say poetic prayer, as well) is done best indirectly.

*Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth's superb surprise  
As Lightning to the Children eased  
With explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind –*

Pray today without concern about directness or indirectness. Simply pray, assuming that your “success” in connecting with God will eventually come, and also assuming that the truths that God has to communicate to you will “dazzle gradually.”

**Day #2: At Least to Pray** – When all else is either prevented, prohibited, or profaned, there is still our capacity to pray that can serve as a lifeline of hope and grace.

*At least to pray is left, is left.  
O Jesus! in the air  
I know not which thy chamber is, –  
I 'm knocking everywhere.*

*Thou stirrest earthquake in the South,  
And maelstrom in the sea;  
Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth,  
Hast thou no arm for me?*

Pray today with a question (or two or three) that you might like to lay before God for consideration. Though you may feel like you have been “knocking everywhere” without out much in the way of apparent answers, know that your very questions, and the praying of them, are enthusing ways to connect with God.

**Day #3: The Pain of Parting**– Recount today how many times your life has “closed” – losses, deaths, curtailments, deep woundings, crucial rejections, etc. – and then meditate on the heavenly and hellish aspects of those previous “closings.”

*My life closed twice before its close.  
It yet remains to see  
If Immortality unveil  
A third event to me,*

*So huge, so hopeless to conceive  
As these that twice befell,  
Parting is all we know of heaven,  
And all we need of hell.*

Pray today for a **completed** closure of at least one moment in the past when life “closed” for you. Then seek God’s guidance in moving beyond that moment, and your clinging memory of it, into a more empowered future.

**Day #4: The Thing With Feathers** – The following poem is one of Dickinson’s most famous. Woody Allen used it as a sort of foil in his rather dour, yet still humorous book entitled *Without Feathers*. Here she likens the experience/event of “Hope” to a bird.

Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul,  
And sings the tune without the words,  
And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;  
And sore must be the storm  
That could abash the little bird  
That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chilliest land,  
And on the strangest sea;  
Yet, never, in extremity,  
It asked a crumb of me.

Pray today with an eye and an ear and a heart open to hope dwelling in you. Do so with the assurance that Dickinson emphasizes: Hope is generative, it gives and does not take.

**Day #5: God Exists** – In this poem the puritanical Protestantism that had saturated the culture around Dickinson's family is fused with her own steadfast clinging to God's closeness and mysterious presence.

I know that He exists.  
Somewhere -- in Silence --  
He has hid his rare life  
From our gross eyes.  
'Tis an instant's play.  
'Tis a fond Ambush --  
Just to make Bliss  
Earn her own surprise!  
But -- should the play  
Prove piercing earnest --  
Should the glee -- glaze --  
In Death's -- stiff -- stare --  
Would not the fun  
Look too expensive!  
Would not the jest --  
Have crawled too far!

Pray today with no words, simply moving into a confidence that "Somewhere – in Silence" God will bless you with "a fond Ambush...."

**Day #6: Save One Person, Save the World** – There is an old Jewish proverb that goes: "To save one person is to save the world." This is what Dickinson is getting at in the following septet.

If I can stop one heart from breaking,  
I shall not live in vain;  
If I can ease one life the aching,  
Or cool one pain,

Or help one fainting robin  
Unto his nest again,  
I shall not live in vain.

Pray today by simply reciting this poem three times, allowing for a minute or two of silence between recitations, and trusting that singular acts are profoundly, lastingly worthwhile.

**Day #7: Madness and Much Sense** – Christian faith is, for the most part, counter-cultural in nearly ever age. This is a small surprise when we are called to "love enemies," "forgive seventy times seventy," "pray for those who persecute you." In the following poem, Dickinson moves between the tension between Madness and Sense.

Much Madness is divinest Sense –  
To a discerning Eye –  
Much sense – the starkest madness –  
'Tis the Majority  
In this, as All, prevail –  
Assent – and you are sane –  
Demur – you're straightaway dangerous –  
And handled with a Chain –

Pray today for "divinest Sense," knowing that receiving and believing such "Sense" is "straightaway dangerous." Pray for the basic sense to know when and how best to resist "the starkest Madness" of the "the Majority."

### Emily Dickinson – Bibliography

Dickinson, Emily, and Thomas Herbert Johnson. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson : Including Variant Readings Critically Compared with All Known Manuscripts*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1955)

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