



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 #7 – Dylan Thomas and Jane Kenyon

A NOTE ABOUT THIS SESSION – In this session of “Praying with the Poets” we compare two poems which pose two very different experiences of contending with death. The driving urgency, raging affirmation of life, and defiance of death’s dominion in Dylan Thomas’ “Do not go gentle into that good night,” written in the shadow of his father’s forthcoming death, have made it one of the most renown (and most quoted) English-language poems pertaining to the death of a loved one. Jane Kenyon’s “Let Evening Come,” on the other hand, focuses on the inevitable relinquishment into “evening’s” embrace, the call to trust God in the face of that inevitability, and the transformation of death’s arrival from a threat into a gift.

Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) – born in Wales; sickly as a child; dropped out of school at age 16; published first book of verse at age 20; known for his impassioned poetry readings, dramatic persona, and theatrical drinking; became enduringly famous by a 1950 reading tour in America; died of alcoholism after extended bout of drinking in New York City – was a poet cut from Romantic cloth, treasuring poetry of intense emotion, personal connections, and lyricism writ large.

Do not go gentle into that good night

*Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

*Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.*

*Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

*Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.*

*Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

*And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

Day #1: When Defiance is Needed – Clearly this is a poem by someone who defiantly yearns for a loved one to endure and “rage against the dying of the light.” Ponder those you know who have given up prematurely in their earthly journey. Pray the poem’s last two lines as a petition.

Day #2: – Beyond Current Human Measures– Throughout this villanelle – a restricted nineteen line poem with a defined, repetitious rhyming scheme – Thomas speaks of “wise,” “good,” “wild,” and “grave men” who have not yet reached the fulfillment of their lives. Consider the measures of completeness for your own life. Are you complete, done, finished with your life tasks? Pray today by giving thanks for the tasks set to your hands that remain yet to be completed. Seek God’s strength and guidance on how best to fulfill your life journey.

Day #3: Blessed by Fierce Tears – In the closing stanza, Thomas seeks from his father a benediction that will amount to a commitment to live. Why, one can ask? Perhaps out of fear of losing his father? Perhaps because of the poet’s inability to deal with his own death? Perhaps because the poet and his father are in need of reconciliation? Perhaps because of the need of all people to be blessed by their progenitors? A combination of all of these? Pray today for a clarity in your relationships with family members and those friends closest to you and for the benediction of “fierce tears,” yours and theirs, in your final leave-takings.

Dylan Thomas – Selected Bibliography

Poetry – *Eighteen Poems* (1934)

Twenty-Five Poems (1936)

The Map of Love (1939)

Deaths and Entrances (1946)

The World I Breath (1939)

New Poems (1942)

In Country Sleep, And Other Poems (1952)

Prose – *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (1940)

A Child’s Christmas in Wales (1954)

Drama – *Under Milk Wood* (1954)

Jane Kenyon (1947–1995) – born in Ann Arbor, Michigan; received B.A. and M.A. degrees from University of Michigan, where she met and married poet and teacher Donald Hall; in 1975 moved with Hall to his family's ancestral farm at Eagle Pond, Wilmot, New Hampshire; subject (with Hall) of Bill Moyers' award-winning documentary "A Life Together" in 1993; translator of Anna Akhmatova; renown for her poetry and her valiant battle with depression; poet laureate of New Hampshire; treasurer of the South Danbury Christian Church, near Eagle Pond; died from leukemia; subject of *The Best Day The Worst Day: Life with Jane Kenyon*, Hall's memoir of her cancer battles and bone marrow transplant procedures – made a large literary impression, despite her brief 48 years, with an emphasis on the miraculous nature of everyday life, "the art of the luminous particular," and a questing faith.

Let Evening Come

*Let the light of late afternoon
shine through chinks in the barn, moving
up the bales as the sun moves down.*

*Let the cricket take up chafing
as a woman takes up her needles
and her yarn. Let evening come.*

*Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned
in long grass. Let the stars appear
and the moon disclose her silver horn.*

*Let the fox go back to its sandy den.
Let the wind die down. Let the shed
go black inside. Let evening come.*

*To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop
in the oats, to air in the lung
let evening come.*

*Let it come, as it will, and don't
be afraid. God does not leave us
comfortless, so let evening come.*

Day #4: Evening's Inevitability– In the various aspects of her New Hampshire country life – including both the *animate* (light, cricket, dew, stars, moon, fox, wind) and the *inanimate* (barn, bales, hoe, shed, bottle, scoop) – Kenyon describes the irrepressible progress of a day's (and a life's?) movement toward the resolution of "evening." The varying interpretations of the meaning of "evening" include: peace, resolution, a ceasing of frenzy, an end of movement, and death. Consider those among your acquaintance who have struggled – with valor and a large sense of triumph – against the coming of "evening" and yet who now are facing the inevitability of death's arrival. Pray that they, their families, and you will "let evening come."

Day #5: Accepting the "Ending-ness" – What Elisabeth Kübler-Ross did in psychology and Sherwin Nuland did in medicine, Kenyon

accomplishes poetically in "Let Evening Come": an irrefutable description of how death will come and a reminder that we need not be afraid of it. Pray today by giving thanks for the closure, completion, and "ending-ness" that life provides all human beings when death comes. Give thanks for the comfort that also comes at times of death, both for us or through us for others. And offer a sighing, thankful prayer that such comfort can make life's final event a blessing.

Day #6: Finished Business– Kenyon's imploring "let evening come" sounds as if it emanates from a soul who has little if any "unfinished business" with those closest to her. Pray today for the honesty and insight to discern what pieces of "unfinished business" need tending in your relationships. Could it be a farewell conversation? Could it be Ira Byock's *Four Things That Matter Most* – saying "Please forgive me," "I forgive you," "Thank you," "I love you"? Could it be the gift of a tangible bequest? If your "unfinished business" is actually finished, pray today that you will be a vessel for assisting others in completing their "unfinished business" with you.*

Day #7: Choosing Our Poetic Prayers – When someone we care about is facing death, or even in the face of our own deaths, it may be that Dylan Thomas' "Do not go gentle into that good night" is in order. In all eventual dying occasions, Jane Kenyon is right to say "...so let evening come." Pray today that you will possess the wisdom to share an encouraging word of defiance and/or a comforting word of acceptance – whichever one is most needed – for those you love and care for.

(* The encouragement pertaining to "unfinished business" is based on Forrest Church's keen observations about his battle with esophageal cancer, during a presentation at Community Christian Church, September 2007, which are also contained in his forthcoming book **Love and Death: My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow**, from Beacon Press.)

Jane Kenyon – Selected Bibliography

Poetry *From Room to Room* (1978)
The Boat of Quiet Hours (1986)
Let Evening Come (1990)
Constance (1993)
Otherwise: New & Selected Poems (1996)

Prose *A Hundred White Daffodils* (2000)

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