

The Woman in White (Summer Saints 2021: Emily Dickinson)
A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on July 11, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church

What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. (I Corinthians 15:50-58, NRSV)

I hope you all had a safe and happy 4th of July holiday weekend last week. Lisa and I did, with a nice, quiet time at the Bear Hollow Zoo and Wildlife Trail on Monday. We had never been there before, and it was quite the oasis of peace and beauty, hidden inside an active community. We quickly came to see it as a kind of devotional space, giving us a chance to re-charge and get in touch again with what’s truly important, that we may look forward with new energy and perspective.

It’s this idea of making a devotional space in the midst of life that I think will help us understand our Summer Saint for today – the great 19th century American poet Emily Dickinson. As hard as it may be to imagine now, she was largely unknown in her own lifetime, and only came to be widely recognized in the years after her death. She left school as a teenager, eventually living a reclusive life on her family’s estate. There, she lived all her adult life, secretly creating bundles of poetry and writing hundreds of letters. It was only due to a fortunate find after her death by her sister Lavinia that Dickinson’s remarkable work was discovered and published. Today, of course, she is considered one of this country’s greatest and most original poets, one of the towering figures of American literature.

Dickinson was born on December 10, 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts – the middle child of three born into a prosperous and well-educated family, with deep roots in New England. Her paternal grandfather, Samuel Dickinson, was notable as the founder of Amherst College. Her father worked at Amherst and served as a Massachusetts state legislator.

Emily was an excellent student, though she ceased her formal schooling at 18. She began writing as a teenager. Her early influences included Leonard Humphrey, principal of Amherst Academy, and a family friend named Benjamin Franklin Newton, who sent her a book of poetry by Ralph Waldo Emerson. In 1855, Dickinson ventured outside of Amherst (one of the very few times she did), going as far away as Philadelphia. There, she befriended a minister named Charles Wadsworth, who would also become a cherished correspondent.

Among her peers, Dickinson's closest friend was a woman named Susan Gilbert, who would become her sister-in-law when she married Emily's older brother Austin in 1856. Austin and Susan settled in a property known as the Evergreens, just next door to the Dickinson estate, known as the Homestead.

By the mid-1860s, Dickinson herself rarely left home, but it was apparently time well-spent, for it was around this time, from the late 1850s to mid-1860s, that she was the most productive as a poet, creating many bundles of verse – all without any awareness on the part of her family.

When she wasn't writing, Dickinson studied botany and produced a vast herbarium. She also maintained an extensive correspondence with a variety of friends and contacts. One of these friendships, with Judge Otis Phillips Lord, may have even developed into a romance before Lord's death in 1884.

But her seclusion during much of her life was conspicuous, especially in her later years, and it has been the subject of much speculation. It's quite likely that she suffered from some combination of conditions such as agoraphobia, depression, and/or anxiety, all while wrapped up in her responsibilities as guardian of her sick mother. Emily and her sister Lavinia served as chief caregivers for their ailing mother until she passed away in 1882. Neither Emily nor her sister ever married, and they lived together at the Homestead until their own deaths.

But whatever precisely the factors were, her life by any measure was a quiet one, and she died of heart failure in Amherst on May 15, 1886, at the age of 55. She was laid to rest in her family plot at West Cemetery. The Homestead, where she was born and lived all her life, is now a museum.

As I've said, at the time of her passing, very little of Dickinson's work had been published, and the few works that had been published were edited and altered to adhere to conventional standards of the time. Unfortunately, much of the power of her unusual syntax and form was lost in these alterations. But shortly after her death, her sister Lavinia discovered literally hundreds and hundreds of poems that Dickinson had crafted over the years – all in her distinctive style. The first volume of these works was published in 1890. As hard as it may be to fathom, a *full* compilation of her poetry wasn't actually published until 1955, though previous, less complete, editions were released well before this.

Dickinson's stature as a writer soared from the first publication of her poems in their original, *intended* form. Her authentic and unique literary voice was freed from its confines at last, and the indelible mystery of her life could finally be fully appreciated.

Scholars and literary critics have for years debated the meanings present in her work, but they agree that the great theme rising up again and again in her haunting words is that of *Death* – feeling it, reflecting on it, struggling with it, seeking to understand it. Death, for her, was the Great Problem ... a riddle she could never solve, but which she never stopped exploring, just as it was one she could never escape, as it claimed the lives of her family, friends, and loves.

Dickinson was given to melancholy most of her life, and even from a very young age was troubled by what she called the “deepening menace” of Death, especially the deaths of those closest to her. When Sophia Holland, her second cousin and a close friend, grew ill from typhus and died in April 1844, the 13-year-old Emily was traumatized. Even two years after, she wrote in a letter that “it seemed to me I should die too if I could not be permitted to watch over her or even look at her face.” She became so despondent that her parents sent her to stay with family in Boston for a time to recover.

As death succeeded death over the years, Dickinson found her world, again and again, upended, leading her late in life to write, “The Dyings have been too deep for me, and before I could raise my Heart from one, another has come.”

This heartbreak, this spiritual struggle, is reflected deeply in her greatest work, expressive of the many feelings and conditions of the soul evoked by the threat of Death ... anguish ... pain ... loneliness ... fear ... dread ... emptiness ... horror ... resignation ... or even sometimes, a sense of release and relief. And this wide array of feelings, conditions, and emotions are conveyed by a wide array of images. Death is often personified, but in wildly different ways, to different effects. It may be a cruel victimizer or a stealthy assassin ... an indifferent leveler or a deeply personal enemy ... or at other times, an elusive lover or a relentless suitor, or a refined coachman to take us on to a destination unknown.

Dickinson was intimately aware of how Death makes us all equal, no matter our condition or station in this life:

*Not any higher stands the Grave
For Heroes than for Men-
Not any nearer for the Child
Than numb Three scores and Ten-
This latest Leisure equal lulls
The Beggar and his Queen ...*

And she had an all-too-keen sense of Death’s inevitability, creatively imagined as a patient wooer who will sweep us *all* off our feet in the end:

*Death is the supple Suitor
That wins at last –*

*It is a stealthy Wooing
Conducted first
By pallid innuendoes
And dim approach
But brave at last with Bugles
And a bisected coach
It bears away in triumph
To Troth unknown
And Kindred as responsive
As Porcelain.*

It was this “Troth unknown” that so mystified her – this reality all of us are destined to experience, yet none of us now understand ... terrifying, sad, and yet strangely compelling all at the same time. And all her exploring, over a lifetime of exploring, led her to this: Making what peace she could with the reality of Death. Yes, she was sometimes overwhelmed with sorrow, pain, suffering, and depression, and yet at other times, she found a sense of joy and hope overwhelming her. Even as Death haunted and taunted her, she came to find within herself acceptance in the face of avoidance ... curiosity in the face of fear ... and even humor in the face of grief.

One of my favorite short poems of hers is this playful one, imagining herself as a child who pleads with her Father to let her in on a secret:

*“Good night,” because we must!
How intricate the Dust!
I would go, to know –
Oh Incognito!*

*Saucy, saucy Seraph
To elude me so!
Father! they won't tell me!
Won't you tell them to?*

I love the line, “How intricate the Dust!” When we die and enter that long “Good night,” the dust that we are mixes back with the soil, and we re-enter the endless mystery that is life and death and life again. If the poet could only go “Incognito,” she’d follow along to learn the secrets beyond the grave. Too bad those “saucy, saucy” seraphs (angels) won’t give up any answers. As if she’s a tattling child, she calls on “Father” to *make* them tell. It’s a nice teasing tone she takes, not in the least shy to address God Almighty!

It's not as though her fears and her sadness ever finally went away, but they were tempered by balancing forces of acceptance and peace and trust. But you don’t arrive at such a place without some journeying and some living and some hurting. For Dickinson, it was a journey of bringing the peace of God and the hope of the gospel into her experiences of loss, such that

what breaks the heart can be an occasion for discerning the Light in the midst of the Darkness ... and echoes of Eternity rising up from the depths of Time.

This, I think, is what lies behind Dickinson's outwardly odd practice of nearly always wearing a white dress, especially in her later, more reclusive years, and then, upon her own death, being buried in white and laid to rest in a white casket. Scholars have debated the meaning of this for a long time, speculating that it may have been an homage to an Elizabeth Barrett Browning poem in which the title character wears "a clean white morning gown." Alternative literary inspirations may have been the eccentric, heartbroken Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, or the Snow Maiden in one of Nathaniel Hawthorne's great stories.

But as is so often the case, the simplest explanation is usually the right one, and it's this: That the white of her dress and, later, the white of her casket was a symbol of Eternal Life, and that her donning of white was a *spiritual* choice, the creation of a kind of everyday *devotional space* – an ordinary reminder of a sacred truth – by which she lived into her growing perception of Light in Darkness and Eternity in Time, and with this perception, an *acceptance* of unknowing and an ultimate trust in the Giver of Life.

This acceptance, this wisdom, runs counter to the instincts of our own time and culture, in which so much energy is put into *avoiding* the truth of our mortality – *avoiding* the reality of Death – by delaying it, denying it, cheating it, glossing over it. Of course, the tragedy is that by *not* facing it, we cannot be ready for it – cannot be prepared for that one thing that we *will* all have to face one day. And as all the great wisdom traditions of the world teach, if we never learn how to die, we can never truly learn what it is to live.

But Emily Dickinson offers us another way – a way of *facing* the truth of Life and Death. Her many years' struggle with the Darkness reveals a path of creating space for Immortality in the midst of the mortal, that our earthly lives, no matter how dark the path, may ever be illumined with Heavenly light ... and that, at the end, we may be able to cry out with her in defiant joy –

*Let down the bars, O Death!
The tired flocks come in
Whose bleating ceases to repeat,
Whose wandering is done.
Thine is the stillest night,
Thine the securest fold;
Too near thou art for seeking thee,
Too tender to be told.*

To the Glory of God! Amen.