



A Room Full of Friends: Poets
 Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; September 7, 2025
 13th Sunday after Pentecost
 Psalm 148

It was Emily Dickenson who penned,

*Tell the truth but tell it slant—
 Success in circuit lies
 Too bright for our infirm Delight
 The Truth's superb surprise*

*As Lightening to the Children eased
 With explanation kind
 The Truth must dazzle gradually
 Or every man be blind—*

We have come to expect the Truth spelled out—great truths—truths of the universe—truths of humanity—truths of God. And who, pray tell, is doing the telling? Who, pray tell, is doing the listening? This morning marks the end of the summer sermon series, “A Room Full of Friends.” Over the summer I have introduced you to friends who have come to reside on the shelves of my study—preaching friends, writing friends, deeply spiritual friends. But now, we turn our attention to poets. Perhaps you have heard me share a favorite Evelyn Underhill quote: “One of the worst things that happened with the Reformation was we took all the poetry out of religion.” She was right. She still is.

You may remember that the Reformation did not begin as a movement to separate from the Catholic Church. No, the intent was to reform things that had gone badly—the selling of indulgences to raise money for St. Peter’s Basilica—the way people were refused a biblical text in their own language—and the list goes on. In time it became crystal clear that the church leaders in power intended to remain in power and reform could only happen with the birth of what we now know as the Reformation.

Lots of good things happened with the Reformation—of course—the Presbyterian church being one of them. But bad things happened, too. For example, extremists decided that art like sculptures, paintings, and icons were not art at all, but idolatry—so they went on a rampage and destroyed countless pieces of religious art—Christian art!

Years have passed but we appear to still be suffering from the ramifications of throwing out the proverbial baby with the bath water. In too many churches—in too many ways—we have come to rely on our own understanding rather than the Holy Spirit. We intellectualize our faith. We hide from the Mystery of God. What’s important is what we know—what we can prove—what we can control. But what about a deeper knowing—a wise knowing—a heart knowing? Is there a way for us to get out of the unbalanced bind we are in?

In my opinion—and I know you are dying to hear it—we might go a long way toward a more balanced faith by getting out of our heads from time to time, to sit with the work of poets, as well as artists and musicians. Surely that would be a good place to start since poetry and art and music summon us into wonder. It is with a spirit of wonder that I invite you to hear these words written by poet, Maya Angelou. Her poem entitled “A Brave and Startling Truth” serves as a reminder of how we are created in God’s own image—created to do good!

*We, this people, on a small and lonely planet
Traveling through casual space
Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns
To a destination where all signs tell us
It is possible and imperative that we learn
A brave and startling truth*

*And when we come to it
To the day of peacemaking
When we release our fingers
From fists of hostility
And allow the pure air to cool our palms*

*When we come to it
When the curtain falls on the minstrel show of hate
And faces sooted with scorn are scrubbed clean
When battlefields and coliseum
No longer rake our unique and particular sons and daughters
Up with the bruised and bloody grass
To lie in identical plots in foreign soil*

*When the rapacious storming of the churches
The screaming racket in the temples have ceased
When the pennants are waving gaily
When the banners of the world tremble
Stoutly in the good, clean breeze*

*When we come to it
When we let the rifles fall from our shoulders
And children dress their dolls in flags of truce
When land mines of death have been removed
And the aged can walk into evenings of peace
When religious ritual is not perfumed
By the incense of burning flesh
And childhood dreams are not kicked awake
By nightmares of abuse*

*When we come to it
Then we will confess that not the Pyramids
With their stones set in mysterious perfection
Nor the Gardens of Babylon
Hanging as eternal beauty
In our collective memory
Not the Grand Canyon
Kindled into delicious color
By Western sunsets*

*Nor the Danube, flowing its blue soul into Europe
Not the sacred peak of Mount Fuji
Stretching to the Rising Sun*

*Neither Father Amazon nor Mother Mississippi who, without favor,
Nurture all creatures in the depths and on the shores
These are not the only wonders of the world*

*When we come to it
We, this people, on this minuscule and kithless globe
Who reach daily for the bomb, the blade and the dagger
Yet who petition in the dark for tokens of peace
We, this people on this mote of matter
In whose mouths abide cankerous words
Which challenge our very existence
Yet out of those same mouths
Come songs of such exquisite sweetness
That the heart falters in its labor
And the body is quieted into awe*

*We, this people, on this small and drifting planet
Whose hands can strike with such abandon
That in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living
Yet those same hands can touch with such healing, irresistible tenderness
That the haughty neck is happy to bow
And the proud back is glad to bend
Out of such chaos, of such contradiction
We learn that we are neither devils nor divines*

*When we come to it
We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this earth
Have the power to fashion for this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
Without crippling fear*

*When we come to it
We must confess that we are the possible
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
That is when, and only when
We come to it.*

It should be no surprise that poetry has the capacity to lead us into the mystery of our Creator—beyond the bounds of what we can touch—what we *think* we know. Our beloved Scriptures are filled with lines of poetry, as in our Psalm for this morning: “Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him from the heights! Praise him, all his angels.” Then there’s Isaiah—one of the most

poetic and beautifully written books of the Bible: “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth... those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

Could it be what we need now in this world that seems bent on destruction is a little quiet, a little space, fewer words strung together just so—to help us see again? Mary Oliver, in her poem “Coming to God: First Days” says it so well:

*Lord, what shall I do that I
can't quiet myself?
Here is the bread, and
here is the cup, and
I can't quiet myself.*

*To enter the language of transformation!
To learn the importance of stillness,
with one's hands folded!*

*When will my eyes of rejoicing turn peaceful?
When will my joyful feet grow still?
When will my heart stop its prancing
as over the summer grass?*

*Lord, I would run for you, loving the miles for your sake.
I would climb the highest tree
to be that much closer.*

*Lord, I will learn also to kneel down
into the world of the invisible,
the inscrutable and the everlasting.
Then I will move no more than the leaves of a tree
on a day of no wind,
bathed in light,
like the wanderer who has come home at last
and kneels in peace, done with all unnecessary things;
every motion; even words.*

Maybe poetry is just what the doctor ordered. Maybe poets are just what the Spirit provides to help us regain our balance—to help us stop relying on our own understanding and instead, gaze at the wonders that call us toward a greater good—toward our Great God. Oh, the words can be simple—nothing too complicated—even a tree can shower us with wisdom. Wendell Berry says as much in his poem, “Slowly, slowly, they return.”

*Slowly, slowly, they return
To the small woodland let alone:
Great trees, outspreading and upright,
Apostles of the living light.*

*Patient as stars, they build in air
Tier after tier a timbered choir,
Stout beams upholding weightless grace
Of song, a blessing on this place.*

*They stand in waiting all around,
Uprisings of their native ground,
Downcomings of the distant light;
They are the advent they await.*

*Receiving sun and giving shade,
Their life's a benefaction made,
And is a benediction said
Over the living and the dead.*

*In fall their brightened leaves, released,
Fly down the wind, and we are pleased
To walk on radiance, amazed.
O light come down to earth, be praised!*

Indeed, let us open our eyes, let us eagerly walk on radiance—amazed! Truly, now may be the time to pay attention to poets. Maybe they are in the best place *to tell the truth slant—a little at a time—with gentle explanation—for “The Truth must dazzle gradually—or every man be blind.”* Amen.