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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Text: John 21: 24-25
 January 22, 2023

Considering Emily Dickinson

So why Emily Dickinson on this January Sunday? Why her? Why now? This past autumn I was standing with Carleen and David Good, and we were looking at a painting of David that had been commissioned at his retirement. It's actually a beautiful painting, but for reasons that I can totally understand, David has been reluctant to have it on display. The feature that caught my eye is the book that he's holding in his hands: a volume of Emily Dickinson's poetry. And it suddenly became clear to me how deeply Dickinson's thought is woven into the fabric of this church, as if she were living in the very walls of this place. One day, I expect, she will live, in a fashion, on the walls of this place.

That insight led me to read some of her work over the past several months. And at one point, David himself mentioned to me that Carleen had set a number of Dickinson's poems to music once upon a time. Which then led to the idea that we should hear those pieces some Sunday, combined with readings of the poems. I thought it a worthy idea, and so we set about making it happen.

Dickinson's poems are spare in their wording, but they can be incredibly complex, and the complexity sometimes only starts to emerge after a lot of consideration. In fact, I'll admit that there have been times when I've heard or read her poetry over the years, and I myself have thought, "Meh!" If that captures your own response, let me sketch, very briefly, why her work might speak to us as people of faith in the 21st century. Let me suggest why it might come to speak to you.

I've come to imagine Emily Dickinson's life and work as a fiery wheel, with various spokes traveling out from a center. In that center stands Amherst, Massachusetts, and Dickinson herself. She lived from 1830 until 1886, and she rarely left the town of Amherst. In fact, for a portion of her life, she rarely, if ever, even left her bedroom. She lived an intensely circumscribed life, one that was unusually provincial even for the 19th century. The center of Dickinson's fiery wheel, like all wheels, is tightly contained in space and time.

But from that center, spokes of fiery language and imagination radiate outward.¹ Here are a few of the spokes that Dickinson mapped from her writing desk: 1. Time. From the passage of seconds and minutes, she stretches her imagination across centuries and aeons to imagine the infinite. 2. A scale of being, extending from the observation of insects - bees and beetles - to the stars. 3. The spoke of geography, where New England becomes connected to far flung parts of the planet - the Arctic poles, but also Africa, Asia, and Europe. 4. A long continuum of cultural myths, with waystations drawn from Greece, from Rome, and of course, from Jerusalem. 5. A scale of population, from the singular individual to a vast horde of people, a mob. 6. A range of religious belief, one that ranges from prayer to utter despair. And 7: A spectrum of emotion, of affect, stretching from insensibility to derangement, with everything in between. There are likely dozens, perhaps hundreds of other such spokes that Dickinson maps with her flaming words.

¹ The image of spokes, and the enumeration of those spokes, can be found in *Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries* by Helen Vendler (Cambridge: Belknap Harvard Press, 2010), pg. 10.

Each of those spokes join to an outer wheel, which Dickinson called “Circumference.” We might think of circumference as the cosmos. We might think of it as the infinite. We might call it the universe, or we might think of it as God. Consider lines from a poem we’ll hear a little later: “The brain is wider than the sky,” Dickinson writes, and then later, “The brain is deeper than the sea.” We find in those lines the realization that what one can think, or imagine, or write, from a little life, in a walled bedroom in a small New England town, can encompass more even than the sky, more even than the ocean. Like that fiery wheel, Dickinson uses her art to spread herself across the cosmos through a consideration of the microscopic and the minute. Her life, and her art, are a wheel on fire.²

As we hear some of her words this morning, begin to imagine such a wheel, and the spokes that form it. But as you do, imagine this as well: your life too is a wheel on fire. From your tiny perch in New England - in Old Lyme or East Lyme, in Old Saybrook or Essex or whatever location in which you are centered, you too have spokes radiating out toward circumference. Those spokes might extend through the relationships you maintain. They might extend through the imagination you nurture, and cultivate. They might extend through your encounters with the natural world. They might extend through the activity of prayer. But you yourself are a wheel on fire, spreading toward the cosmos, extending toward God, from the center of your own existence, no matter how confined or constrained it might be.

Let’s start there. Let’s allow Dickinson’s poetry to take us on a journey that is at one and the same time microscopic and expansive, minuscule and yet infinite. I hope she becomes the occasion to sense the flaming wheel that is your life.

A Bridge Between Scripture and Poetry

The Gospel of John concludes not with closure, but with an opening. If we were to write all the things that Jesus did, it says, all the world could not contain the books that could be written. It’s a gesture toward an open canon of the Bible, in which there are many possible Scriptures, and many possible ways that the story of God - circumference - is found in flesh - a circumscribed center. We do well to follow that final gesture in John to wherever it may lead us. Here in New England, perhaps it helps us to understand the literary treasures that were birthed here - Melville and Dickinson, Hawthorne and Stowe, Twain and Douglass and Frost and Stevens as extensions of Scripture, insofar as they attempt to touch the mystery, the terror, and the ecstasy of what it is to be alive. This Sunday, it allows us to understand that the poetry of Emily Dickinson can be an extra-canonical source of Scripture. And so in the following readings, I invite you to hear another set of sacred texts disclosing the holiness of the world, and the holiness of all of life.

² A wheel on fire: an image borrowed from Ezekiel Chapter 1, but later given expression by Bob Dylan and The Band, in “This Wheel’s On Fire,” from 1967, one of the compositions that formed the legendary recordings collected in *The Basement Tapes*. They deserve to be heard, and understood, in relation to Emily Dickinson’s poetry. I’m drawn to the idea that one hundred years after Emily Dickinson lived and wrote in Amherst, Dylan gave voice to a similar theme while hiding out in West Saugerties, New York. It would seem that there’s something in the soil and climate of New England that almost necessitates reaching back toward arcane Old Testament imagery in order to understand the self and the world.

My Business is Circumference

Across the street from Emily Dickinson's house in Amherst there is a Congregational Church, one that she attended as a child. It informed her sense of language - her poems often have the cadence of a hymn - and she was saturated with the imagery of the King James Bible. Even so, as an adult, she most often stayed away from the church. Of a preacher, she remarked in a poem, "He preached upon 'Breadth' till it argued him narrow." It's a worthy criticism for all of us who enter the confined space of a pulpit, for all of us who attempt to capture the infinite with words. And it's a stinging rebuke of the narrowness in which churches too often remain confined. By contrast, Dickinson wrote, "My business is circumference."

I wonder what it would mean for each one of us to say such a thing: my business is circumference. But more than that, I have the sense that that has been a guiding thread of this church community for many years now. You may have been content to preach and listen to "Breadth" till it argued you narrow - but you've extended out. Out from here, toward those who are hungry. Out from here toward those who lack housing. Out from here toward those threatened with deportation. Out from here toward those who worship differently, who organize the universe differently, who conceive of many gods and not just one. Rather than preach and listen into narrowness - which happens in all too many churches - you've become centered here, and have pushed out toward the complexities of the world, as experienced in South Dakota and Haiti, as experienced in Palestine, in Mexico, and shortly, in New Orleans and West Africa. When I say that Emily Dickinson lives in the walls of this place, that is what I mean. Your business - our business - has been circumference.

And so let this Sunday, and let Emily Dickinson's poetic vision, be a reminder to us never to become too satisfied, or to sit too comfortably, within what we have come to call identity - our religious identity, our national identity, our racial or ethnic identity, our gender or sexual identity. Our business is circumference, which is to say that as human beings we possess ways of transcending the limitations of our lives. We have the capacity to imagine, and to inhabit, other worlds. We have the capacity to identify with, and to take on, other forms of life. The greatest of our artistic and religious visionaries do just that, and they do so through the cultivation of empathy. "I contain multitudes," Whitman wrote. "I see myself in others," Bob Dylan said. "My business is circumference," Emily Dickinson said. May it be - may it continue to be - our business as well.