

## Celebration

Rev. Louise Green

August 1, 2010

Text by Emily Dickinson

*I dwell in Possibility*

*A fairer house than prose ---*

*More numerous of windows ---*

*Superior -- for Doors ---*

*Of Chambers as the Cedars ---*

*Impregnable of eye ---*

*And for an Everlasting Roof*

*The Gambrels of the Sky ---*

*Of Visitors --- the fairest ---*

*For Occupation ---This ---*

*The Spreading wide of narrow hands to gather Paradise ---*

This lovely and familiar poem came to me on Friday, a gift from the unexpected comment of friend. We were in Carroll County, Maryland at

a very beautiful lake in Piney Run Park. After all the humid oppressiveness of the record-setting July heat, Friday's weather was a treasure in itself! We had been paddling in kayaks through the still, cool water--gazing at hundreds of blooming water lilies, hearing the occasional deep plop of frog or fish, wondering about the long, eerie call and response of many geese. We were gazing from the water up at the cornflower-blue, open summer sky full of cascading puffy clouds. We munched on a picnic at a wooden table set among fragrant pines.

My friend Karen quoted the first lines of Emily Dickinson's poem, and in those few words I was reminded of how we construct our lives. We decide where we want to dwell metaphorically, even amongst all the materials foisted upon us in the rough and tumble of existence. Day by day, month by month, we build the symbolic house in which we live. Therefore we have a great deal of power as architects and carpenters, drywall hangers and painters. We can create an intentional point of view that influences our circumstances, mood, relationships, and health.

This spare poem asserts that *she* builds a house of *possibility*, not *prose*. The more mundane *prose* of everyday life is needed, as it is the text of subsistence and survival. However, Emily Dickinson is open to surprises, ready for transformation and growth. She chooses many windows for her view, not just one or two, constructs her living chambers like lofty cedar trees, closed and secure rooms that cannot

be disturbed by the gaze of a stranger's eye. Dickinson rejoices in an everlasting roof, one that stays strong and eternal through the challenges of living.

What a treasure that roof is, one she calls the *gambrels of the sky*! I had to look up that unfamiliar word, and found the architectural reference in photos of the two-panel sides of roofs on barns and cottages. Think of two roof slopes that go halfway down at one angle, and then take a much sharper plunge towards the ground. When you translate these roof gambrels to the sky, imagine that the open blue with puffy clouds, or the midnight black with blazing stars, is your very own roof. That the universe itself is creating your covering, and so your vantage point looking up is limitless, infinite. Paddling my kayak through Piney Run lake, on a perfect summer day among water lilies, I knew exactly what the poet meant. I felt the joy of sky so vast that you could float right up into it, like a birthday balloon let loose at a backyard party. I felt the freedom of movement.

How does Emily Dickinson plan to live in this house of possibilities, this open space? She invites fair visitors to her home, people who will honor her space and contribute to her living. Those who understand the focus of her intentional point-of-view: "*For Occupation ---This --- The Spreading wide of narrow hands to gather Paradise ---.*" This is a grand gesture of a life designed to be celebratory, an acknowledgement of limits in our narrow hands and a yearning for something larger. To "*gather Paradise*" is to embrace creation, to

spread wide beyond the mundane prose of daily life, and to construct places of connection, festivity, and beauty. To say, "*I dwell in possibility,*" is to allow space for celebration.

The irony of this poem is that Emily Dickinson lived a remarkably circumscribed life in the 1800s in New England. She was from Amherst, Massachusetts, educated at Mt. Holyoke, a prolific writer of letters and poems. Yet from her 20's until the time of her death in her 50's, she remained a secluded inhabitant of her family home, never even venturing off the property. More than 1700 poems were found in a box after she passed away, yet only 7 were published while she was alive. She dwelt in intense, deep, rich possibility, within the confines of one very large house.

Dickinson was part of an impassioned religious debate of the day, one that grew the Unitarian movement in New England to the denomination we inherit today. The extremely short-hand version is that the stern Calvinists were calling folks to judgment and accountability, the Trinitarian Congregationalists were saying God had to be three in one—no debate allowed, and the free-thinking Unitarian Transcendentalists were proclaiming possibility. Rejecting the concept of predestination of sinful souls, they embraced a wide-ranging set of values, turning Puritanism on its head.

A group of Boston-area Unitarian intellectuals--Margaret Fuller, Theodore Parker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau—were finding the spark of the Divine in each person, enjoying ecstatic

contact with Nature, romanticism in human connection, and the power to design their own lives. Transcendentalists had full faith in the inherent worth and dignity of every soul. This led to active participation in the two main human rights issues of the time: the abolition of slavery and the increasing inclusion of women in public life. The point of living was the union with the Over-Soul, which according to Emerson's *Essays, First Series* is the "*great nature in which we rest . . . that Unity within which every... particular being is contained and made one with all other.*"

So when Emily Dickinson speaks of her desire to "*gather Paradise,*" she means to embrace *all* of creation. When she spreads her arms wide beyond the mundane prose of daily life to " *dwell in possibility,*" she calls us to allow space for celebration. We celebrate the power of human family, the interdependent web of the natural world, the places of beauty we are able to find and treasure.

When we pause to celebrate, we remember. We remember that life is good, that gratitude is infectious, that we are the architects of our own houses.

Over the last week I have been very fortunate to be at many celebrations. Last weekend I spent time with four generations at a family reunion in North Carolina, reading accounts of my great-grandmother going off to China alone, playing with the new babies of my cousins. Wednesday some of our All Souls staff celebrated graduations, birthdays, endings and travel over Vietnamese food and

the new frozen yogurt in Columbia Heights. Yesterday I was at the Mall for the first National Dance Day, watching seniors move skillfully in the rhythms of D.C. Hand Dancing, and children zoom around doing jazz on the grass. Last night, I went to see the National Symphony at Wolf Trap, doing musical themes from science fiction TV and movies. We also watched a gorgeous film *The Planets* in HD by Jose Salgado, while listening to the soaring sounds of Gustav Holst's symphony, *The Planets*. From family to food, from dance to the cosmos, I have been enjoying the richness of summer life, celebrating the company of those I love.

For this sermon I researched the origins of today's Benediction in Music. Through Gordon, we will hear the sounds of a group of African-American musicians who have been playing together for fifty years as *Kool and the Gang*. These guys are still touring all over the world, moving smoothly to the famous r & b of "*Celebrate, good times, come on!*" If you watch the YouTube video of their 1980 classic, you join over 6 million others who have nodded along in amazement at their suave dance moves and infectious beat. They remind us to be happy. They call us to a party of life, a celebration of each other and essential goodness. This is the anthem of celebration of our time and people love it.

Life is good when we take time to savor it. When we celebrate, we affirm the deepness of human connection, the joy of gathering, the

continuity of time. May it be so for you and yours. May it be so for this community, one that celebrates all souls. Amen.