

## “Seeking Warmth”

In these cold, dark days of winter, when we have planned more than our usual share of memorial services, I find myself in search of good words. Poetry is a simple thing, but it eases my soul. Language draws me out of myself and connects me to others.

Mary Karr writes: From a very early age, when I read a poem, it was as if the poet’s burning taper touched some charred filament in my chest to light me up. The transformation could extend from me outward. Lifting my face from the page, I often faced my fellow creatures with less dread. Maybe buried in one of them was an ache or tenderness similar to the one I’d just been warmed by. (“Sinners Welcome,” 2006)

It is no surprise that many of my favorite scripture texts are poetic passages, voicing the ineffable, articulating the inexpressible. The best poetry captures the great twinned themes of church life: judgment and mercy; lament and hope; sin and grace.

If I were not a pastor, I suppose my second choice of vocation would be poet – preferably one whose name is followed by the phrase: winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. I wouldn’t mind standing in the shoes of Czeslaw Milosz, who wrote “Late Ripeness” about the spiritual wisdom that can come with grief.

Not soon, as late as the approach of my ninetieth year,  
I felt a door opening in me and I entered  
the clarity of early morning.

One after another my former lives were departing,  
Like ships, together with their sorrow.

And the countries, cities, gardens, the bays of seas  
Assigned to my brush came closer,  
Ready now to be described better than they were before.

I was not separated from people,  
Grief and pity joined us.  
We forget – I kept saying – that we are all children of the King.

For where we come from there is no division  
Into Yes and No, into is, was and will be.

This is the light in our darkness: grief and pity do not isolate us; they join us in a bond of love. This is the source of warmth in winter: grief and pity remind us that we are all children of the King.

This is the miracle: we cease to oppose death, because we affirm our faith in the resurrection. Our beloved church is a community of memory, where we live on after death through the shared life and the shared story of the congregation.

Dying well means dying in the midst of a community of believers who are not afraid; it is a practice of faith.

Hear the good news: Whether we live or whether we die, we belong to Christ, who is lord of the dead and the living.

In Christian love, Julie R. Harley

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