Devotion, Week of October 11, 2026

Rev. Jeanne Simpson

I attended a concert Sunday afternoon by Joyce DiDonato, mezzo-soprano, and a string trio, Time for Three, at Spivey Hall. I wasn't sure what to expect, because the program was the singing of a number of Emily Dickinson's poems. The poems were all short, but most were very melancholy. Some were angry, a few were humerous, and all were very moving. I was in tears at the end. I came home and read up on Emily Dickinson. She had a somewhat strange life. She was born in 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts, to a somewhat cold and hypochondriac mother, and a father who encouraged his children to be educated. His father had founded Amherst College, and he served as treasurer of the college and also in various political positions.

She suffered from chronic illnesses and a relentless sequence of grief caused by the loss of nearly everyone close to her. She withdrew from public life in her mid-twenties and spent the final two decades largely confined to her family home, communicating with many visitors only from behind closed doors. In her cloistered room, she wrote almost 1800 poems, but only 10 were published in her lifetime. She did not follow standard forms for poetry at that time, and she asked her sister to burn all her writings after she died. Her sister, thankfully, found all the poems in notebooks, and had them published. Some of my favorites include these two that DiDinato sang:

If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.

No prisoner be—
Where Liberty—
Himself—abide with Thee—

The program ended with this last short poem, which was upbeat and repeated numerous times. DiDonato named the program "Emily, No Prisoner Be," and she had us all sing those words, "No Prisoner Be," over and over with her. Ironically, Emily was in fact a prisoner in her room due to her own anxiety and melancholy, and also a prisoner of the times. Her poetry would not have been accepted by mainstream society. And yet, her legacy lives on with her considered to be one of the best poets in America.

Jeanne