



# Praying with the Poets

T.S. Eliot \* Mary Oliver \* Emily Dickinson \* Langston Hughes \* Tagore  
Maya Angelo \* Jane Kenyon \* Dylan Thomas \* Rumi \* Wendell Berry  
Thomas Traherne \* Scott Cairns

Community Christian Church - 4601 Main Street - Kansas City Missouri  
**Session #2 - Mary Oliver**

**Mary Oliver** - Ohio native, student at Ohio State and Vassar, late-life Episcopalian, winner of countless poetry awards (including the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the Lannan Award), author of more than two dozen books of poems and prose, resident of Provincetown, Massachusetts - has become a celebrated and best-selling poet noted for her accessible style, riveting images, plain language, and passionate attention to nature. (The books by Mary Oliver from which the poetic excerpts below have been taken are: \* = **Thirst**; \*\* = **New and Selected Poems**; \*\*\* = **West Wind**.)

**Day #1: On Prayer** - In "Praying" \* Oliver says this:

*It doesn't have to be  
the blue iris, it could be  
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few  
small stones; just pay attention, then patch*

*a few words together and don't try  
to make them elaborate, this isn't  
a contest but the doorway*

*into thanks, and a silence in which  
another voice may speak.*

Pray today by focusing on the "doorway" of prayer itself, considering all aspects of life for which you are thankful and then "patch a few words together." Do this for at least 10 minutes. Then sit silently for at least 10 minutes as you listen for "another voice."

**Day #2: Authentic Life** - In "When Death Comes" \*\* Oliver says:

*When it's over, I want to say: all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.*

*When it is over, I don't want to wonder  
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.  
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,  
or full of argument.*

*I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.*

Pray today with a focus on your own status (actual/potential) of being "married to amazement." Confess any sighing, fright, argumentativeness that may have hindered your journey. Verbalize your requests to God as to how your life can be "something particular, and real."

**Day #3: Loving Others** - In "What I Said at Her Service" \* Oliver says:

*When we pray to love God perfectly  
surely we do not mean only.*

*(Lord, see how well I have done.)*

Pray today that God may see how well you have done loving God by loving others.

**Day #4: Trusting God** - In "Little Summer Poem Touching the Subject of Faith" \*\*\* Oliver uses the image of corn fields to learn something new about faith:

*Every summer  
I listen and look  
under the sun's brass and even  
into the moonlight, but I can't hear  
anything, I can't see anything --  
not the pale roots digging down, nor the green stalks  
muscling up,...*

*nor the tassels making,  
nor the shucks, nor the cobs....  
... I fail as a witness, seeing nothing -  
... all of it  
happening  
beyond any seeable proof, or hearable hum....*

*What should I fear?*

*One morning  
in the leafy green ocean  
the honeycomb of the corn's beautiful body  
is sure to be there.*

Pray today by trusting God to bring to fruition more than you can ever see or hear or know.

**Day #5: God's Door** – In *“Musical Notation: 2”*\* Oliver juxtaposes God's possession of all that is with a consideration of her own home and the world outside her doors.

*Everything is His.  
The door, the door jamb.  
The wood stacked near the door.  
The leaves blown upon the path  
that leads to the door.  
The trees that are dropping their leaves  
the wind that is tripping them this way and that way,  
the clouds that are high above them,  
the stars that are sleeping now beyond the clouds*

*and simply said, all the rest.*

*When I open the door I am so sure so sure  
all this will be there, and it is.  
I look around.  
I fill my arms with the firewood.  
I turn and enter His house, and close His door.*

Pray today for a sense of the everywhere-ness of God and not only that but for the pure possession of your life by God so that where you live might also be called *“His house.”*

**Day #6: Something Useful and Unpretentious** – In the poem *“More Beautiful than the Honey Locust Tree Are the Words of the Lord”*\* Oliver prays with deep gratitude for a graced day.

*... oh Lord, let me be something  
useful and unpretentious.  
Even the chimney swift sings.  
Even the cobblestones have a task to do, and do it well.*

*Lord, let me be a flower, even a tare; or a sparrow.  
Or the smallest bright stone in a ring worn by someone  
brave and kind, whose name I will never know.*

*Lord, when I sleep I feel you near.*

*When I wake, and you are already wiping the stars away,  
I rise quickly, hoping to be like your wild child  
the rose, the honey-maker the honey-vine;  
a bird shouting its joy as it floats  
through the gift you have given us: another day.*

Pray today that you will be open to receive the gifts that God yearns to give you on this *“another day.”* Pray also today that whatever you do will be a *“useful and unpretentious”* gift for the benefit of others in the world, for the blessing of the wide embrace of nature, and for the increase of God's purposes in the community where you live.

**Day #7: Holy Thirst** – In *“Thirst,”*\* the poem that closes out her book by the same title, Oliver says:

*Another morning and I wake with thirst for the goodness  
I do not have. I walk out to the pond and all the way God  
has given such beautiful lessons. Oh Lord, I was never a  
quick scholar, but sulked and hunched over my books past  
the hour and the bell; grant me, in your mercy, a little  
more time. Love for the earth and love for you are having  
such a long conversation in my heart. Who knows what  
will finally happen or where I will be sent, yet already I  
have given a great many things away, except to be told to  
pack nothing, except the prayers which, with this thirst,  
I am slowly learning.*

Pray today with a sense of gratitude for *“such beautiful lessons”* that God has granted to you. Pray for *“a little more time”* so that the conversation that is going on in your heart – between your connection with utmost ideals and your connection with God – can reach fulfillment.

### **Mary Oliver – Bibliography**

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This is a part of the weekly series of the Prayer Group of Community Christian Church, 4601 Main St., Kansas City, Missouri 64112, 816-561-6531, FAX 816-531-0805.