I have a reading. It is a Billy Collins poem, entitled: “Introduction to Poetry.”

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem’s room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to water-ski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author’s name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

We live in a world in which most people of faith seem to know what everything means. Believe these things, do these things, and everything will work out. Believe these things, do these things—especially give liberally to the earnest and winsome preacher—and the prosperity that God desires for you will transform your life. They make it sound as if there is a formula, an equation to be solved, a riddle to be answered, a marching band routine to be learned that will guarantee perfect rows and the prize at the end of the day. What it means to be a human being and what it means to be a person of faith and how to live as one who is open and responsive to the mystery of the Holy—I have always found that those questions required qualified, limited answers. They are questions that

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urge me to live in thoughtful silence, questions that often require me to say what I believe, what I intuit, what I hope, even what I am willing to give my life for, but not necessarily what I know.

The voices that speak with the most authority, of course, base their pronouncements and their surety on their interpretation of scripture. But I do not know how those interpreters can hear the one voice they wish to hear in the throng of all the others that are speaking. It is stunning that people hear the storyteller weave not just one, but two differing accounts of creation, and continue to try to fit a 21st-century world into an ancient cosmology—the Bible theme park near Florence, I read, has dinosaurs grazing near the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve happily within. Scripture has been used to defend indefensible positions and has been used to justify deeply unjust things. Israel clings to its chosenness; the early Church maintains its stranglehold on women and dismisses Jew and Gentile alike who speak in differing accents about Jesus of Nazareth, the Beloved of God, who was captured and co-opted by a Constantinian world. Some of the most beautiful poetry about physical, intimate love ever to be written is a part of scripture, and the rabbis who included it and the Church Fathers who adopted it have been trying to say it was a conversation about the love between Israel and God. No, it is a conversation between Christ and the Church. No—says anyone who has ever been in love. It is poetry about the intoxicating experience of loving another human being with all of one’s body and spirit.

And yet, scripture takes away all the smugness it helps to foster in startling ways. The Book of Jonah is not a cute story about how a human being could fit into a big fish, about which literalists have endlessly obsessed. It is a stunningly subversive folk tale that confronts Israel about the universality of God’s love. It must have been a jolting word to hear, even in a folk tale, that God cares for the Ninevites, the violent and rapacious enemy of Israel, the Assyrians, the last word in the outsider—and even their
cattle. If the best we can do, when we tie down the story of the Good Samaritan, is to torture a moralizing tale out of it, then we have not heard the contrary word scripture wants to speak. The arrow that flies straight into the heart of any hearer of Luke’s story is not that we should be compassionate people; we should do the right thing even when other people do not. The kicker is that it was a Samaritan, the most reviled, most despised person in the society of the day, who cared for the victim. And the realization that has to come quickly behind it is that we are the person in the ditch. Who is my most detested enemy? Who is yours? Who is the Other I do not wish to acknowledge or include—that one, Jesus says, is your savior, your lifeline. Tell me who you wish to exclude, someone has said, and I will be able to tell you about your God.****

The historian John Lukacs has written: “Human knowledge is neither objective nor subjective. It is personal and participant—which places us at the center of the universe...because the purpose of human knowledge—indeed, of human life itself—is not accuracy, and not even certainty; it is understanding.”² By now you may have inferred that I am more comfortable in the mystery and less sanguine about absolute truth claims in the life of faith. You have also gleaned that I bring to bear upon my biblical study and theological inquiry the love of learning that was first nurtured here at Centre. But it was not the knowledge that I gained here that I want to celebrate, although my education has enabled me to engage and to succeed wherever I have gone. But it was the deep struggle to understand what is Other that has profoundly shaped my life.

There is nothing more Other in this life than to expend one’s whole being on something as ephemeral as a musical phrase. At the fundamentum, even now as a pastor and not a practicing musician—I am grasped by the mystery and transcendence of

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² John Lukacs, “Putting Man Before Descartes,” The American Scholar, p. 18. I have the article, but have lost the volume number. I think it was either the last journal of 2008 or the first of 2009.
coming to understand a piece of music artistically, spiritually, and physically. I am not finished with being a musician yet; I intend to re-enter this profound part of my experience of the divine again. But anyone who attempts to create art or to interpret the work of others knows what a singularly lonely and intense experience it is. For me, it is akin to the desert experiences of Christian mystics—even with the briefest but most ecstatic moments of experiencing the Holy. This hall, Newlin Hall, has absorbed hundreds of hours of my struggle to learn to become a musician, first as a student who labored to become proficient in the craft; and later, as a person who came to direct choirs at my beloved Presbyterian Church and to serve as the college organist. Robert Weaver patiently shaped and prodded, demanded and cajoled until the day came that I knew that the art of music was beginning to become my own. I am forever indebted to him for the intellectual and artistic rigor he brought to the task and to the deep love he fostered. Through music, I connected with people’s spirits—through music I found a way into a deeper humanity and beyond to the mystery of what I know as the divine. Two comments from those days have stuck in my memory: “She plays like a man!”—it was said—and I think they meant it as a compliment. I could not become a minister because I was not a man, based on what the Bible had to say, but it was a good thing, apparently, that I could play the organ like a man, whatever that means. And the second came from as exotic a person as I had met at that time in my young life. A professor, Vivanna Brodey, from New York: an Orthodox Jew who became a convert to an Indonesian religion; who dreamed of wearing her mumus on the beaches of Hawaii, who taught me literature and philosophy; who claimed that she heard the voice of God when I played, and I will always thank her for understanding the depth to which I aspired.

But the second experience that I am certain has shaped my life and ministry came, not with the ephemeral, but with the messy and complicated world of human relationships. Two worlds collided my freshman year at Centre College when I entered
the women’s restroom on my hall one afternoon in the fall. It was in the early 70’s, not so long after the race riots of the late 60’s, not quite at the end of the soul-shattering Viet Nam War, not so long after the student unrest across our country. I was a young girl from a rural community, raised by salt-of-the-earth parents, with a mother who was a feminist in some ways before most people knew there was such a thing. I was precocious in intellectual ways, naïve in social ways, and sure only of my love of learning and interest in music. I had long hair, and I had on pretty nice clothes purchased by my comfortably middle class parents—except for the fact that my pants were a little too short for the boots I was wearing. Not particularly style conscious, I didn’t really care. In the restroom was a very short, very dark-skinned African-American girl whom I had not met yet. She was from an area in a city not so far away that was known in a racially disrespectful way and from a family grouping that did not fit the traditional profile. I do not remember what she was wearing, but I remember that she was picking her Afro with a large black comb. We spoke; I brushed my teeth as she worked on her hair. Then she said, “Nice high waters, honky.”

It is hard to believe that I did not know what either part of that greeting meant. I did not know what high waters were and I had never heard the phrase, “honky.” I am certain my look of total perplexity was so disarming that even this angry, combative, wonderful, amazing, bright young woman was left speechless. She didn’t think that people like me existed on the planet; she could hardly process someone as naïve as I was. And that was the beginning of my liberal arts education. She and I wrestled all through college with what it meant for a black woman like her and a white woman like me in our time and place to be best friends. We saw each other as the Other, in the theological parlance of Levinas—the person who was fundamentally a stranger, fundamentally unlike the other—and the struggle to see each other as sister was ferocious at times. Both sides of our families could not understand, with people of our “own kind” to love,
how was it that we were the only best friend for the other? Both of us experienced peer
disapproval, she more than I. And yet, on the campus of Centre College, I came to
understand and to respect this person who forced me to learn about empathy, who
taught me about sacrificial love. It was a friendship that was wrought not just out of
racial prejudice on both sides, but out of very different temperaments and out of evolving
worldviews of two women who aspired to be educated people. Once you have that kind
of struggle; once you experience that kind of depth and even joy; once you learn how like
the Other you really are, or more importantly, once you become the Other yourself, you
can never be the same. The cat is out of the bag. How can race or ethnicity, how can
gender or orientation, how can socioeconomic categories, how even can religious
differences stand before one profound experience of the Other? Central to my liberal arts
education was the examination of what it means to be a human being. Central to my
understanding of faith and the mystery of God continues to be the examination of what it
means to be a human being in the inclusive love of the divine.

When my son heard that Centre had invited me to deliver the baccalaureate
sermon for your graduation, he sent me a link to an article in The Chronicle of Higher
Education: “6 Ways to Make a Commencement Speech Soar.” His memorandum to me
said, “Granted, it’s sermon.... I am not sure whether he was questioning the form or the
speaker. But Class of 2009, I wish you as much joy as I have known in my lifetime thus
far of trying to live in the mystery of it all, trying to free poetry and story and theological
reflection from the narrowness of those who think they have the truth and spend their
passion on trying to exclude Others. I wish you both the struggle and the joy of being in
relationships with Others who challenge the very foundations of whom you have known
yourself to be thus far. I believe fewer things now, but I believe in them more deeply: I
believe in a God who is Love and in the Son, in whom I see a reflection of deep
compassion for those who stand apart from the status quo. I believe in the Spirit that bears witness with our spirits in the profundity of art and in the beauty and wildness of nature and in our struggles to understand both the darkness and light of our humanity. I believe in dreams of the impossible possible that Christians call the kingdom of God, which has everything to do with what together we can do in this lifetime, here and now. I believe in a world in which redemption and transformation are possible, but not without Muna, my Muslim friend, or AJ, my Jewish friend, or Jan, my lesbian friend, or Rita, my Buddhist friend, or James my recovering friend, or Charles my unbelieving friend. The poet William Stafford says it better than I can say it:

If you don’t know the kind of person I am and I don’t know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

More than anything else, Class of 2009, what I wish for you is the same wish I have for my own children, something that has happened for me and began here at Centre College. Howard Thurman said it, and you will remember that he was a great teacher and mentor of Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

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