

First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter

East Longmeadow, MA

November 12, 2025

PASTORAL REFLECTION Reverend Thomas Hawkins



LESSONS FROM AN OAK LEAF

After last week's wind and rain, most of the trees in our yard have lost their leaves. There was one exception. Our red oak still has its leaves. They will become progressively more tattered as winter takes its toll on them. Their beige and tan colors will soften winter's bleakness until spring comes and then next year's leaf buds will finally dislodge them.

Oak trees differ from most other deciduous trees, which typically drop their leaves in the autumn. Most other shrubs and trees in temperate climates have leaves that create what is called an abscission zone at the base of the petiole or leaf-stalk. This abscission zone consists of plant cells designed to separate from each other. When these cells separate, the leaf drops away from the parent plant. Oak leaves are an exception to this process. Oak leaves undergo what botanists call marcescence. In marcescent plants, the abscission zone is not activated until the spring.

Why? Botanists don't know, although they have several theories. Oaks are a very ancient species. Botanists have found oak pollen in Austria that dates from the Paleocene Era around 55 million years ago. This suggests that the oak tree's marcescence may have had some survival value millennia ago. Perhaps the oak's lingering leaves protected tender leaf buds from intense, bitter cold in a climate much less temperate than ours. Other botanists suggest oaks with a gene for marcescence were a defensive response to hungry predators looking for something to eat when the snow covered the ground. Their prickly, bitter leaves were less appealing to foraging deer or other animals. Only oaks with predator-resistant marcescent genes survived. The others were eaten by hungry deer or mice.

References to oak trees occur frequently in the bible. It was beneath the "oaks of Mamre" that Abraham and Sarah are visited by three angels. (Genesis 18) It's in the branches of an oak tree that a fleeing Absalom caught his hair, leaving him hanging mid-air and thus vulnerable to pursuers seeking to kill him. Isaiah 61:1-3 compares God's people to "oaks of righteousness." It's not just the Bible that has an affinity for oak trees. Among the ancient Celtic peoples, oak trees were especially revered. Their high-ranking priestly caste were known as Druids, which means "oak-knower" (dru-wid).

What spiritual lessons can we draw from the oak tree's marcescence? The first and most obvious is that this year's leaf although battered by the weather hangs on to protect the tender, new bud until it unfolds next spring. There is a responsibility of care and protection Christians have for the most vulnerable. The Bible describes this in terms of caring for the "widow and orphan" and the "sojourner in the land."

But there are other lessons as well. Oaks remind us that perseverance in and resilience to adversity are important virtues. Despite winter's bitter winds, oak leaves persistently hang on. Unexpected and often unwanted surprises regularly blow through our lives: A diagnosis we weren't prepared for, a large expense we didn't anticipate and don't know how to pay for, a phone call or visit delivering disrupting news. Amid the emotional rollercoaster of life, our faith reminds us to persevere. It provides us with resources to bounce back when life's storms knock us down. As children of a loving, creative God, we are called to be "oaks of righteousness" who embody courage, resilience, and hopefulness.

There's a second lesson we can learn from the oak leaf's marcescence. In 1819 Scottish pastor Thomas Chalmers preached a famous sermon entitled "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection." He proposed that the best way to dislodge a destructive habit or pattern of thought is not to focus on the habit or behavior from which we want to free ourselves. Chalmers instead counseled his listeners to focus on the habit that they wanted to move toward.

Don't look back at where we have come from. Look forward to where we want to go. When we give all our efforts to eliminating a bad habit, we are unintentionally energizing it. Rather than weakening it, we are strengthening it. Thinking about what we don't want to do only kicks up our resistance to letting go of it. When we focus on developing a new habit, on the other hand, the positive energy we give to our future self - our new "affection" - pushes the old one out of our lives. We focus on our "yes" rather than on our "no."

Chalmers, unlike many gloomy Scottish Presbyterian clergy of his time, was telling his parishioners not to focus on avoiding "sin." Instead, they were to focus on doing as much good as they can, as often as they can, to as many as

they can. Isaiah recommends something similar when he proclaims that God is telling them to “remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (43:18-19) Acquiring something new that we want in our lives may leave so little time for the bad habit that it drops off like a red oak leaf in springtime.

So, while we are raking up the remaining leaves in our yards, we might ponder what advice the oak leaves hanging over our heads can teach us about how to live.

Blessings, Thomas

SUNDAY WORSHIP in the sanctuary or livestream link: <http://www.facebook.com/churchontherotary/>

ADVENT STUDY “Minor Players in a Big Story”

Join Pastor Thomas for this year’s Advent Study, “Minor Players in a Big Story.” We’ll be using familiar carols or hymns and scripture to look at some minor characters in the Christmas story: Elizabeth and Zechariah, the shepherds in the hills around Bethlehem, and King Herod.

December 7 – “Struck Speechless”

(Zechariah and Elizabeth)

Scripture – Luke 1:5-23, 57-80

hymn – “Blessed Be The God of Israel”

December 14 – “Playing the Victim Villain”

Scripture – Matthew 2:1-18

Carol – “Coventry Carol” (Lullay, Lullah)

December 21 – “A Glimpse of Heaven”

Scripture – Luke 2:8-20

Carol – “While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks”

Each session will begin shortly after Coffee Hour at 11:15 & conclude at 12:30 p.m.

Please sign up on the poster in fellowship hall so we have an idea of the size space we need for seating!

THANKSGIVING FOOD COLLECTION

We have a Thanksgiving food collection to benefit and serve the families in need at Kensington school. Some examples of items you could put in your bag are: rice, pasta, pasta sauce, peanut butter, jelly/jam, soups, crackers, cookies, cereal, tuna or canned chicken, canned vegetables or fruit, snack cups of fruit/applesauce, etc.

Please bring the bags back to church by **Sunday November 23** and place them on the altar. The staff at Kensington and the families we serve are so appreciative of our help. Thank you so much for your continued support and for sharing God’s love with our Kensington families.

STEWARDSHIP NEWS

Stewardship letters were mailed out last week. If you have not received yours, please call the church office and we can send one to you. In keeping with the times, instead of referring to “pledges”, we will refer to “Estimates of Giving”. This makes a good deal of sense because we are not asking for a contract but rather an estimate of what you think you can contribute. I hope this will make it easier to submit an estimate so that we will be better able to make an accurate budget for 2026. Please return your estimate of giving card by November 23. Thank you

PRAYER CONCERNS

- asks for strength in dealing with the end of his semester and minor outside stress as well.
- ask us to pray for all caregivers who serve others in this church, in our community, and around the world.
- Our military that is struggling with the uncertainty of getting paid and how they will pay their bills. Also for our government to work through this time.
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PRAYER FOR THE WEEK

Gracious Creator, you are the grounding presence of our lives. In the midst of life’s uncertainty and turbulence, give us your wisdom of hanging on with courage and resilience when the winds of life batter us. Amen.



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7 Somers Road, East Longmeadow, MA 01028

Web: churchontherotary.org ~ email: office@churchontherotary.org ~ 413.525.4121