

# First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter

East Longmeadow, MA

January 21, 2026

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## PASTORAL MEDITATION by Reverend Thomas Hawkins

### WHY CHICKADEES DON'T HAVE SOMETHING STUCK IN THEIR CRAW

Every morning Jan or I refill the bird feeders that are a few feet beyond the window where we eat breakfast. Then we watch an endless parade of wild birds (and squirrels) at our feeders: Chickadees, Juncos, Cardinals, Tufted Titmice, House Finches, Yellow Finches, Nuthatches, and at least four species of woodpeckers: downy, hairy, red-bellied, and yellow-shafted flickers. Not to mention the Blue Jays and Starlings. We then look at empty feeders every evening and ask ourselves, "How much can such small birds eat?"

The answer is, "A lot." During December, one chickadee can eat up to 80 sunflower seeds a day. That's the equivalent of you or me eating 100 pounds of hamburger daily. Consumption can double or triple during extreme cold. That's impressive for a bird that weighs less than one-half ounce.

Chickadees need such quantities of food because they lose ten percent of their body weight each night during cold weather, all of which must be replenished the next day. Unlike many other bird species, chickadees do not have a "crop" or what sometimes is called a "craw." A bird's crop or craw is an expandable, muscular pouch in a bird's neck. Some birds and even insects use their crop or craw to store food temporarily. It is like a lunchbox where birds store food so they can eat it later. If you are a skilled birder, you can look at a bird's neck and discern whether their crop is sunken into their throat or puffed out, telling you about the current level of storage in its craw.

A bird's crop or craw gives us the expression, "that sticks in my craw." Literally, it means food has become stuck in our throat. Most of the time, however, we use it metaphorically to mean an experience or statement that's irritated, annoyed, or offended us.

We humans may not have a literal craw; but we certainly have a metaphorical one. All of us sometimes encounter people whom we experience as rude or annoying or who express opinions we don't agree with. Living in a hyper-vigilant culture with a great deal of free-floating anxiety, our antennas are constantly attuned to opposing opinions. So it's easy to be triggered into getting someone or something "stuck in our craw." It can happen between family members, neighbors, co-workers, or acquaintances. It can happen between organizations and nations, as we are seeing in everything from hostile exchanges between US and European heads-of-state to cellphone videos from Minneapolis and Chicago. Having something stuck in our craw has a way of escalating misunderstandings and fostering confrontation.

While there's sound medical advice for removing something physically "stuck in our throats," advice for dealing with something metaphorically "stuck in our craw" is harder to find. The Bible, however, does provide some suggestions. Here are three quick ones:

First, the psalms remind us honestly to acknowledge our full range of emotional responses, even our negative ones. The Psalmists write not just about their wonder and praise of God but also of their anger and desire for vengeance. The more we deny or ignore what's stuck in our craw, the more powerful we make it. When we are unaware of our strong emotions and emotional triggers, we can let them manage us rather than us managing them. It's one reason conflict de-escalation techniques recommend avoiding "you-statements" ("You make me so angry when you say ....") and encourage us to use "I-language." ("I feel .... when .... because...what I want is....")

Second, rather than become confrontational or combative when someone says something that "sticks in our craw," the Bible tells us to be curious instead of combative. The Book of James describes this move from combative to curious: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. (1:19-20) Being curious helps us withhold judgment until we better understand someone's experiences and motivations. "Judge not that you not be judged; condemn not that you not be condemned." (Luke 6:37).

Instead of judging we can be curious - What in us is responding so strongly to this person or situation? What in this person's life-experiences motivates them to hold the opinions we disagree with? As in St. Francis' prayer: First seek to understand rather than be understood. Curiosity invites us to ask ourselves how we are contributing to a conversation that's becoming tense and confrontational. Jesus tells us not to react to the speck in someone else's eye when there's a big beam of wood in ours. It's why good communication techniques usually encourage paraphrasing what others have said before responding with our own thoughts or perspective. ("What I hear you saying is...")

Finally, the Christian spiritual practice of discernment proposes that we ask ourselves, "Will what I am about to say or do contribute to peace or stir up further discord?" Or "When I speak am I coming from a place of peace and care within me or from a place of hurt, fear, or woundedness?" It's worth remembering that Jesus could challenge and rebuke. But he sat at more tables than he overturned. He most often wrapped the truth in forbearance.

In a historical moment when there's so much free-floating anxiety and uncertainty in society, all of us are quick to react to others and point fingers at each other. At such moments, we as Christ's disciples we are called "as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you have a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." (Colossians 3:12-14) None of us do this perfectly, but we can all do better as part of our witness to a world in such turmoil and confusion.

Blessings,  
Pastor Thomas

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

**"FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS" – Study begins next week**

Tuesday evening Zoom 7:00 - Jan 27

Wednesday 12:30 p.m. - Jan 28

If you have signed up earlier in January, we have books for you in the breezeway this Sunday, January 25. Stop by and pick one up. If you've not yet signed up but want to participate, please let Pastor Thomas know today

All dates for the Tuesday evening 7:00 **Zoom** study are: 1/27, 2/10, 2/17, 2/24

All dates for the Wednesday 12:30 **in-person** study are: 1/28, 2/4, 2/11, & 2/18

**PRAYER CONCERNS**

## **PRAYER**

Gracious God: Our church calendar tells us that we are back again in Ordinary Time. Advent passed through its four weeks. We have finished Christmas and Epiphany. Yet there is so happening around us that it doesn't seem ordinary right now. Some people struggling to stay warm amid the bitter cold and snow. Some are those anxious about work or family. Others are coping their health or relationships. Events in the larger world around us leave us puzzled or anxious. Maybe no time is truly ordinary time when it comes to each of our lives. Inspire us to live as your faithful people have always lived: leaning into hope, trusting each other and your wise guidance amid a changing world. Holy One, we thank you that even the most ordinary day becomes extraordinary with you alongside us. Amen.



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