

First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter

East Longmeadow, MA

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PASTORAL MEDITATION by Reverend Thomas Hawkins

A MONUMENT TO SHARED HUMAN EXPERIENCE, A SACRAMENT IN WOOD AND STONE

This past Sunday, we gathered post-worship for our annual financial congregational meeting. Our leadership framed the meeting around a theme of “gratitude.” And afterwards we re-assembled in Butler Fellowship Hall to share a cake made especially for this celebration of gratitude.

There is much to be grateful for about the financial resources that make possible a vibrant mission at First Congregational Church and touches so many lives in our community. There is much to celebrate concerning long-overdue maintenance that has been completed, from new windows both in the education building and the sanctuary to a new handicapped accessible bathroom, from an upgraded sound system to electrical system upgrades. So many people have contributed in small and large ways to all these successes that it’s impossible to name all of them.

Listening to presentations on our finances past and present, I found myself looking around at the room in which we were gathered. It’s a physical space where people have been worshipping and making decisions since 1828, although much altered from how it looked when rolled down the hill to its current location in the 1850s and later renovated in the 1940s. First Congregational Church is the oldest church building in East Longmeadow. It houses the oldest Christian congregation in town. Until a separate town hall was built in 1882 it also hosted East Longmeadow’s town meetings. We worship in a space where ten generations of faithful people have met week-by-week, Sunday-by-Sunday to pray, sing, study, make decisions, and mutually support each other.

My thoughts turned to a book I’ve been reading recently. Peter Ross’ *Steeple Chasing: Around Britain by Church* chronicles his travels around England, Wales, and Scotland exploring everything from bat control in an 14th-century Norfolk church (incidentally, it’s not the “belfry” where bats are most likely to roost) to Doorkins the MagnifiCAT, the feline media star at Southwark Cathedral in London. It’s a quirky book that is simultaneously funny, empathetic, and inspiring. I’d seen it in a Welsh bookstore while on a long-distant hike last summer and recognized that Ross was describing some holy wells, cathedrals, and country churches that I’d visited at one time or another. Finally, months later, winter’s snow and ice has given me a guilt-free opportunity to sit comfortably inside a warm home and read it.

At one point, Ross is conversing with the director of a volunteer organization entitled “Friends of Friendless Churches,” which is dedicated to the rescue, repair, and reopening of abandoned mostly rural churches in England and Wales that have lost their membership and closed. “I love these places because they are full of traces of the people who used them.” the director explains. “When you see a worn step... you think of the feet that went over it.” Well-worn houses of worship have been “anointed by human activity and emotion too, over a long span of time. That people have come to pray, that they have brought their hope and anguish, their boredom during long services, their young to be baptized and their dead to bury – all of that has been absorbed by the building. Break open a piece from an old church wall and you might find joy and grief” swirling out into the room along with the dust.

Another volunteer with Friends of Friendless Churches tells Ross, “I take the view that a church is a sacrament of stone.” He explains that “These buildings transcend time. They are the spiritual investment” and the legacy of generations. They are “a community’s greatest expression of shared human experience within their walls” and a “monument to the lives of thousands of ordinary people who have been completely forgotten about.” It’s not the physical reality of the space that is important so much as the ways in which these spaces become saturated with the presence of all those who have prayed, grieved, rejoiced, and extended mutual care to each other across many lifetimes.

Church buildings like First Congregational Church outlive us, Ross concludes, “A human lifespan, to a church, must seem a passing season. Just as the seasons provide markers and definition to our lives, so do people’s lives mark and define the churches they attend...The story [of a particular church] is therefore about friendship and kinship: between the many generations who saw value in this place” and the people gathered there to pray, worship, and serve.

As snow plows and salt trucks were still clearing our streets last Sunday morning, we bundled up, trudged through piles of snow, and came to worship in a space whose walls are saturated with the prayer and song, joy and grief, quiet contemplation and heart-felt praise of many people. Some we know and remember. Some are from generations so long ago that their names are long forgotten. There is an invisible, spiritual energy they have endowed to us and that envelops us when we meet in our nearly 200-year old building. We gather in a space that represents a living sacrament of friendship and kinship in Christ across many lifetimes.

Sitting there hearing about budgets and wise stewardship of our financial resources, I imagined being invisibly surrounded by those nearly ten generations of faithful men and women whose enduring presence saturates the walls of First Congregational Church. They were not afraid of change as periodic alternations to our spaces for worship, learning, and outreach so dramatically demonstrate. They were aware of the social, political, and economic forces shaping their world and they struggled to discern how to respond to their historical moment as we do to ours. They and we are together part of a long line of generations who seek to live faithfully and to guide our institutions with wisdom and discernment.

Sunday’s financial meeting was a demonstration of our current leadership’s good stewardship of the physical and financial resources that our present membership entrusts to them. It was also a reminder of those past generations who have gifted us not just with financial endowments but also their living presence, which is never far from us as we worship and work in ministries that they loved in their time as much as we do in ours. Like us, they too saw value in this place and the people who worship, pray, and serve here together in Christ’s name.

Sitting in our nearly 200-year old sanctuary during last Sunday’s annual meeting, I thought of how grateful I am to be a part of a congregation of faithful people who are persistent in prayer, worship, and service across so many generations. I hope you are too.

Blessings,
Pastor Thomas

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

SPIRITUAL TYPES WORKSHOP - March 15 in Butler Fellowship Hall

Psychologists tell us that we all have different “information processing” styles. Some of us take in information by hearing it. Others of us process information through reading it. Still others; by using visual methods like diagrams, pictures, or graphs. Educators are taught that different students have different “learning” styles. Some are visual learners who learn new material best using charts and graphic organizers. Others learn best through reading new material or writing information down for themselves. Still others are “aural/auditory” and learn best by hearing and speaking.

Did you know there are also different spiritual types or styles? Some writers have nine of them; others identify 12. One of the easiest models uses four styles of spiritual or religious orientation. Having a sense of these types is helpful because it helps us better understand ourselves and what kinds of experiences or spiritual disciplines help us grow and which ones are more of a stretch for us. Also, every strength if used to an excess can become a weakness or block to our growth. Wholeness is growing to appreciate and draw on all pathways to God, not just the one most familiar or most comfortable.

Want to learn more? Pastor Thomas will be facilitating a workshop on “Knowing Your Spiritual Type” on Sunday, March 15, from 12:30 p.m. to 2:30 p.m. We will begin with a light soup and salad lunch following coffee hour (which gives us an opportunity to have dessert before our meal!). The workshop will then begin at 1:00 p.m. and conclude at 2:30 p.m.

A sign-up list is posted in the breezeway. Question? Speak to Pastor Thomas

ALTAR FLOWERS

The flower committee invites you to remember, and honor loved ones or offer celebration for a joyous event. We have following open dates!

- March 1, 15, 22 & 29 and April 12, 19 & 26

Call the church office if you are interested or sign up in the breezeway.

Kensington Food Pantry – THANK YOU

This Sunday the altar was adorned with lots the bags of food that was generously donated by you. It was a wonderful sight to see. All that nutritious food will be sorted and bagged to bring to Kensington School. Each week our volunteers will bring five bags brimming with food that will be given to five families. I hope you know how much good that your donations will do. It will not only give them much needed food but also the love from our church family that supports this. The school and families are so appreciative of our efforts. The last time we delivered the bags, one of the young women helping us to carry them in paused and said to me “You guys are so awesome”. She wasn’t talking about us. She was talking about all of you. I think she was so right. You guys are so awesome and I am so grateful to be sharing in this mission with you.

PRAYER

This week’s prayer is a prayer for Lent from the Book of Common Prayer:

God of compassion, whose Son Jesus Christ, the child of Mary, shared the life of a home in Nazareth, and on the cross drew the whole human family to himself: strengthen us in our daily living that in joy and in sorrow we may know the power of your presence to bind together and to heal; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.



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