

First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter

East Longmeadow, MA

May 13, 2026



PASTORAL MEDITATION by Reverend Thomas Hawkins

GOD'S FIRST ACHEIVEMENT IS A GARDEN

On this past Sunday, I asked everyone who had played some part in Saturday's Plant Sale to raise their hand. Not surprisingly, almost everyone in the room raised their hand. It's a big endeavor and Butler Hall was abuzz on Friday with organizing plants, pricing them as well as pricing books, puzzles, flower pots, lawn ornaments, and everything else that our families had dropped off.

Because Saturday was such a miserable, cold, and rainy day, I anticipated seeing a lot of the same plants still on tables when I arrived Sunday morning. Much to my surprise, everything but a couple of tables had been sold. Plants from epimedium to day lilies, from amsonia to iris, were being replanted in gardens all over East Longmeadow and beyond. In gardens across many communities, someone took a small piece of East Longmeadow Congregational Church's love and beauty and now has it in their gardens. In an amazing yet quiet way, our congregation has released a blessing over many homes and gardens we may never visit. Through all those plants we touch so many people's lives and plant in their lives and homes signs of our Creator's beauty and joy.

Someone once quoted to me a proverb that said, "when we plant a garden, it is not just the plants that grow. It the gardeners themselves." So all those plants we sold on Saturday are not just growing roots and blossoms. In a mysterious way, they are also growing God's blessings in places and people unknown to us.

God, after all, loves a garden. In one of his essays, the early 17th-century philosopher and Lord Chancellor of England under King James I, Francis Bacon writes that "God Almighty first planted a garden, and indeed it is the purest of pleasures." According to Bacon, planting a garden is a more noble and notable undertaking that building a palace or home. Buildings are "but gross handiworks." Gardens, on the other hand, are "the greater perfection" because a garden "is the greatest refreshment to the spirits of [humankind]." From Bacon's perspective, our congregation is not just refreshing the spirits of so many people, we are adding to the "civility and elegance" of their lives.

When I was at our Plant Sale back in 2024, I brought home several iris and a few other plants. They have all thrived, and when I look at them – particularly in the spring as they burst into blossom – I always think of First Congregational Church. It's as if a piece of the church is right there in my garden.

The importance of our flowers and gardens is not just their beauty or the friendships and sharing they bring to mind. Flowers are frequently mentioned in the bible. More than 150 verses in the Old and New Testaments mention flowers: Everything from the Rose of Sharon to the lilies-of-the-valley are mentioned as well as herbs like mint and dill. There's even a reference to the crocus (Isaiah 35:1). Sometimes flowers are used to describe how our Creator works in our lives. Faith and love grow in our lives like a rose bud that gently relaxes as it opens into full bloom. Isaiah 35 uses the crocus as a sign of resilience and endurance. A wasteland will be transformed into a carpet of crocus as the exiles return to Jerusalem after generations of exile in Babylon.

The Good Book points to how flowers and herbs are more than just decorations for our gardens and homes. They are a reminder that we need beauty in our lives. Researchers at some universities have found that flowers trigger good memories and can have a calming, stress-reducing effect on our lives. They can trigger warm memories and also connect us to the natural world and its cycles of growth. In the giving and receiving of flowers, we strengthen bonds of friendship and family. There are good reasons we associate the flowers with significant moments in our lives like weddings, funerals, and other life-transitions. The flowers anchor our feelings and memories in subtle yet profound ways that ground us in our spiritual and emotional lives.

In many ways, the Bible describes our lives as the gardens where God is at work. God, the Master Gardener, is constantly pulling weeds that sprout up and take root in our lives, loosening the hard soil of our hearts so it can breathe and receive nourishment, raining down mercy that softens our dry souls, and cultivating the virtues and values that help us grow in the knowledge, love, and service of God and neighbor.

Francis Bacon was right to identify God as the first gardener. So, take a walk sometime soon and admire the flowers in gardens and parks. If you didn't pick up some potted plants at our Plant Sale, drop by a local nursery and buy something to plant in the ground or put in your window that will bring you joy and delight as we move into the summer months. And remember that God the first gardener is hard at work in the soil of our lives, cultivating and growing good fruits of the spirit and drawing our hearts more deeply into the love and service of God and neighbor. It's the way a rose relaxes and surrenders its fragrance and beauty into the world around it.

Easter blessings,
Pastor Thomas

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

NOTE FROM YOUR MODERATOR: *The annual meeting is This Sunday May 17 after worship service.*

This year the First Congregational Church of East Longmeadow/UCC Annual Meeting will be held immediately after service in the sanctuary **on May 17**. The warrant to call the meeting with the details and agenda is posted. The first item will be to read and vote to accept the presented slate of officers and Board members that will be presented prior to the meeting in the annual report from church leadership. There will be a few changes, as is normal, to some of the Boards and committees so if you, as a member, feel like you want to engage with a particular board please reach out!

PLANT SALE WAS A SUCCESS

Thanks to all who helped make this event a successful one!

We sold lots of plants, baked goods, books & puzzles. We also sowed lots of other things, like happiness, good will and garden tips. As you know, it takes many hands to make work light. We are grateful for all the help – plant diggers, bakers, movers, sorters, pricers, helpers in setting up and taking down, money takers and every other sort of assistance that was needed to make it a good day.

We loved working with you and are thankful for all your help.
The Plant Sale Committee



Springfield YWCA - 5th largest in the country

The Springfield Y exists to fulfill its mission of eliminating racism, empowering women, and promoting peace, justice, freedom, and dignity for all. The Y provides safe places for women and children in crisis. It provides shelter, support services, and tools for self-sufficiency for women and girls in our community. It operates an 11-acre campus in Springfield that provides shelter to battered women and their children in a modern facility with state of the art computerized security.

When women and their children arrive having fled a dangerous situation in their homes, they arrive with nothing but the clothes on their backs. The Y provides them with a basket of necessary toiletries. We can help, we can offer our support. Please read carefully and donate any of the following items:

- Full size -NEW - soap, body wash, body moisturizer, mouthwash, toothbrushes and paste,
- ***shampoo and conditioner, etc. from brands: Shea Moisture, Pattern Beauty, Mielle, Camille Rose, Curl Mix, CURLS, The Doux, Miss Jessie's,
- feminine hygiene products,
- baby wipes & disposable diapers (especially large)
- coloring books and crayons,

- board games and cards
- GENTLY USED books for children, teens and adults

Please leave your donations in the breezeway until May 31. Thank you for your continued support of this truly life-saving agency right in our own back yard. We can really help out these families in crisis.

PRAYER

This Sunday we celebrate the Ascension, which brings the Easter season to an end. Here's a prayer for Ascension Day:
Lord Jesus: We thank you that, by ascending into heaven, you are no longer bound by time and space but are present to us everywhere across time and space. By your promised Spirit, help us discern your presence in all places and people. For you are present everywhere so that we might be present right where we are and witness to others of your love and mercy. Amen.



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