

First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter

East Longmeadow, MA



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PASTORAL MEDITATION by Rev. Thomas Hawkins

BIRDWATCHING AND BLESSINGS

Now that summer is in full swing, Jan and I have substituted listening to birdsongs over our morning coffee on the deck for our winter watching of chickadees, nuthatches, and cardinals at our birdfeeders. Each morning – weather permitting – we take our coffee out onto the deck in the cool of the morning. Hidden among the leaves, they flit and fly from tree to tree. Frequently we cannot see them; but we always hear them.

My skills in identifying birds from their songs is very rudimentary. I can distinguish one bird call from another; but what bird is responsible for which song is usually a mystery. For years I have looked to the *Peterson Field Guide to Birds* for help. Unfortunately, I found descriptions like this totally obscure and meaningless: “a series of low, rather nasal, whistled notes all on the same pitch, *whĭ, whĭ, whĭ, whĭ, whĭ, whĭ, whĭ, whĭ, whĭ*, or *who, who, who* etc. Note, a nasal *yank* or *hank*. Also an abrupt nasal *tootoo* (double-noted).

Fortunately, Jan downloaded Merlin - the Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s app - to her mobile phone. Powered by eBird, it allows users to identify any bird by their appearance or their song. You can snap a photo and Merlin will suggest what bird it must be. More amazing is its ability to identify birds by hearing their songs. We tap a record button and Merlin produces a spectrograph of the bird’s song. It then compares the spectrograph to a database of possible birdsongs and tells you the bird’s name along with a photo of it. And certainly more comprehensible than *Peterson’s Guide to Birds*.

Some of the birds that Merlin identifies are common ones: Robins, cardinals, chickadees, house wrens, and finches. But I am often surprised by what Merlin hears in the trees around us. Some I have never heard of, let alone know what they look like: The Brown Thrasher, a Wood Thrush, a Red-eyed Vireo, an Eastern Wood-PeeWee, or a Redstart.

Where did these names come from? And who first designated this particular bird as a Vireo, a Thrasher, or a Redstart? And is it really important that we have so many distinct types of sparrows, from chipping sparrows and vesper sparrows, to 41 other named types of sparrows?

The author of the Book of Genesis tells us that Adam is responsible for all these names. “So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.” (Genesis 2:20)

Considering all the species of birds on our planet, just naming every single bird species must have required a very long, long time to complete. Genesis makes an important point, regardless of the details about Adam. We humans have an irrepressible urge to name things, including birds of the air and wild animals. Names help us make sense of the world around us.

What I discovered as I tried to satisfy my own curiosity about who gave these birds their names is that sometimes there’s no one reason why birds are called by one name or another. Sometimes it’s actual behavior the bird exhibits. A Brown Thrasher’s name, for example, literally describes how it thrashes wildly, tossing leaves and twigs this way and that as it forages for food. Other birds have acquired their name because of their color. The Vireo’s name was popularized by early American ornithologist and painter John James Audubon; but it was already described by that name by Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder in the time of the Emperor Vespasian. In Latin *viere* means “to be green.” Hence a small olive-green bird becomes a “vireo.” Still other birds, such as the Redstart (which happened to be singing in our trees one morning this week), come by their names by confusion or misunderstanding as time passes and languages change. A Redstart, a relative of the Robin, has a red tail. The Old English word for “tail” was *steort*. But as Old English faded after the Norman Conquest, people began to forget its meaning. So this bird with a red tail and a touch of red on its wing gradually came to be spoken of as a “redstart.”

The Bible includes more than 300 verses that mention birds. None of them mention a Redstart, Brown Thrasher, or Red-eyed Vireo. It does, however, mention owls, doves, eagles, sparrows, and quail. Worldwide there are more than 11,000 different bird species. Jan and I are shocked at how many different species are nesting in the trees around us. We usually think in terms of a handful of common birds; but there are many more unexpected bird species around that Merlin identifies for us. This hidden diversity around us is a reminder of our Creator's limitless creativity and desire for diversity. "And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good." (Genesis 1:20-21) If we stop, look, and listen to the natural world around us, we might begin to experience a more profound wonder and a deeper awe at our Creator's handiwork and the divine love and holy creativity woven into our lives and the lives of every living thing.

The Old and New Testaments also see birds as signs of God's love and care. As Jesus tells his disciples, "Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!" (Lk. 12:24)

Our feathered friends help us remember that our lives are held safely by One whose power and love are greater than ourselves and embrace more than just us.

Elizabeth Cheney's poem, "Overheard in an Orchard" says it best:

*Said the robin to the sparrow,
"I would really like to know
Why these anxious human beings
Rush around and worry so."
Said the sparrow to the robin,
"Friend, I think that it must be
That they have no Heavenly Father
Such as cares for you and me."*

Blessings on your birdwatching,
Pastor Thomas

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

JOIN US FOR PASTRIES WITH THE PASTOR

You are invited to join Pastor Thomas for informal conversation, pastries or fruit, and something hot or cold to drink on Wednesday, June 16, from 10:00 to 11:30 a.m. in Butler Hall. There is no agenda, just an opportunity to share what's on your mind or heart with each other.

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION NEWS

SUNDAY SCHOOL: Sunday school is over for the year until we start back up in September.

YOUTH GROUP: We had our final Youth Group event of the year on Sunday. It was a family picnic attended by 11 children and 11 adults.

SUMMER OFFICE HOURS

Summer office hours start the week of June 22 and run through September 4. The office will be open on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 9:00 am - 12:00 pm.

Also note, during the summer, the newsletter is distributed every other week. The last weekly newsletter before the start of summer is on June 17th.

YWCA - Overwhelming response!!

Your Mission and Outreach Committee is beyond grateful for your generous support with our latest project.

We FILLED 2 trunks with bags and boxes of personal care toiletries and diapers to deliver to the Y last week. It is obvious that you understand the tremendous services that the Y provides to women and their children in times of crisis, and you want to help.

Thank you so much for your enthusiastic support of this and any and all opportunities to make a difference. M&O



PRAYER

Give us, O God, the patience and expectancy of birdwatchers who know how to sit quietly and in silence; who know how to live with eyes open and attentive enough to see and hear the unexpected beauty, the flash of color, the joyous song that appears suddenly, unexpectedly from among the green leaves. Help us to remember that good disciples, like good birdwatchers, know how not just to listen but also to look for where you are at work making the extraordinary appear amid the ordinary. Amen



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