

# First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter

East Longmeadow, MA

June 3, 2026

PASTORAL MEDITATION by Rev. Thomas Hawkins



## LIVING STONES

I missed all of you last Sunday while I was on my long-distance hike across northern France. By last Sunday I was back in Paris, having finished my official pilgrimage on Saturday. It took me past three of France's finest Gothic cathedrals in Laon, Reims, and Paris. Laon's cathedral is an example of early French Gothic construction. Its construction began in 1155, when Laon was a major center of intellectual scholarship as well as the capital of several early French kings. Laon's cathedral is famous, among other things, for the 16 life-size statues of cows that peer down from its towers. They were carved, according to legend, to honor a mysterious oxen who arrived to help carry some of the massive stone blocks up the hill atop which the cathedral sits. In addition to these cows, the towers and façade are decorated with hundreds of other statues: angels and apostles, saints, kings, and bishops. What attracted my attention, however, were neither Laon's cows nor its angels, kings, and saints. Standing at the main entrance into the cathedral, I noticed some small, human figures carved into the pillars holding up the arch over the main doors. They looked like this:



Their faces and expressions feel to me so life-like and human. They also seem to be depicted in unusual postures. Bent as if holding something up. Arms lifted as if holding something back. They have no wings like the angels. They are depicted in the clothes of workers and peasants rather than royal robes and episcopal regalia. They are easily overlooked; but they are the ones holding up the arches on their backs. Kings and bishops stand erect and stiffly upright. These workers are depicted in doing the hard work of construction workers in an age before tower cranes and skid steer loaders.

Once I started looking for these small figures, I saw them at other cathedrals I visited. These are from the cathedral at Reims that was built in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, nearly a century after the cathedral at Laon.



Here too each face is unique and the postures give the same impression of holding up the wall or arch. These figures are also wearing everyday clothing. They are not wrapped in royal or ecclesiastical garb but rather in everyday “work wear.”

I asked about these figures in the nearby museum at Laon and was told that they were likely modeled on actual townspeople who worked as laborers on the cathedral as it was being built, which explains why each face and figure is unique. It also explains their physical postures and clothing. These are the people doing the heavy lifting required to construct these massive buildings.

Most of the exterior statuary on all three of these early French cathedrals depicts important figures in Christian as well as French history: Kings, bishops, saints, angels, and apostles. But here among them are depictions of ordinary people, carved in such detail and with such precision that, were we living when the cathedral was being built, we would probably recognize the living person being depicted in stone as one of our friends or neighbors.

These small statues spoke to me of how the church is built up and sustained by everyday people in all their uniqueness who do the “heavy lifting” of carrying forth the church’s mission across time and space.

Paul and Peter repeatedly use the image of builders and buildings to describe the church and its members. “Like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house,” Peter writes (2:5). Likewise Paul says in Ephesians that we “are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone; in him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” (2:19-22). Elsewhere, Paul describes his work as that of a builder who must choose with care how to build on the foundation laid for us in Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 3:10-16).

What spoke to me about these statues of everyday people— statues easily overlooked amid the hundreds of sculptures of kings, popes, bishops, saints, angels, and apostles that decorate these cathedral facades— is that ultimately the church thrives and fulfills God’s purposes not just through the powerful and famous but through ordinary people who are always doing the hard work to which God in Christ calls us - building up each other’s lives in mutual care and bearing witness to God’s mercy and care of neighbor and stranger by their everyday words and actions. Each of us is called to do the “heavy lifting” of building up Christ’s love and healing. You and I are the ones who hold up the archway through which people enter into more meaningful lives and deeper experiences of God’s grace and mercy.

With prayer,  
Pastor Thomas

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

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**PRAYER**

You, O Holy One, scatter galaxies into the depths of space and also pour your loving-kindness into the quiet corners of our hearts: We give you thanks for summer sunshine and refreshing rain. May we slow down in these days of early summer and feel your presence and care in our lives. May we encounter the light of your love in one another. May our prayers be a balm for all who suffer and may we serve you each day in quiet confidence. Amen.



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