

First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter

East Longmeadow, MA

July 15, 2026



PASTORAL MEDITATION by Rev. Thomas Hawkins

HE PRAYETH BEST WHO LOVEST BEST ALL THINGS GREAT AND SMALL

I've just finished moving my soaker hoses around my flower beds and vegetable beds. Between the intense sun and sparse rainfall, everything from cucumbers to dahlias are wilting. They needed extra hydration. When I finished, the first thing I did was pour a glass of cold water and drink it in one gulp.

Like the plants in my gardens, our bodies also consist mostly of water, although the percentage varies by gender, age, and even which specific internal organs we are talking about. On average, about 65% of the human body consists of water. But the brain and heart are about 75% water and the lungs 83%. The cucumbers and zucchini that I watered this morning, by comparison, are hydration heavyweights. They consist of about 95% water.

As I was moving my soaker hoses, the lines of a poem from my childhood came uninvited and unexpectedly back to me. Who knows why such memories bubble to the surface when they do.

*Water, water, everywhere,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink.*

These lines are from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," a narrative poem of which I couldn't recall anything but those lines. I also remember being both fascinated and frightened by it when my grandfather Wiseman repeatedly read it to me as we sat together on his living room sofa.

I pulled his old volume of Coleridge's poems off my shelf and refreshed my memory of it. In doing so, I discovered how many casual expressions besides "water, water, everywhere" originated in it, including the expressions, "it's an albatross around his neck" and "they prayeth best who lovest best all creatures great and small."

I immediately realized why I was both fascinated and frightened by this poem. It is full of gothic horror, dead bodies, sea monsters, and phantom ships. It's the tale of a sailor who cruelly and arbitrarily kills with his cross-bow a friendly albatross that was accompanying his ship. The spirits of the sea then exact revenge upon the ship and its crew. The ship is becalmed. Its crew, without fresh water, suffers from excruciating thirst amid a vast ocean of salty, undrinkable water – which is where the lines about "water, water, everywhere," are spoken. Writhing sea snakes and other monsters surround the sailors. Eventually a phantom ship arrives piloted by Death and Life-in-Death. All the crew except the Mariner drop dead. And the mariner himself is condemned to a wandering existence of eternal penance. As now myself a grandparent, it's an unusual choice of poem to be reading to a child. Maybe Robert Louis Stevenson's "How do you like to go up in a swing / Up in the air so blue?" would have been more appropriate.

Coleridge, who was one of the originators of the 19th-century English Romantic movement, eventually brings his poem to its conclusion, which likely explains my grandfather's fondness for it. The conclusion is a concise summary of that movement's affection for the natural world and what it can teach us if we are willing to learn from it: All living things are connected and deserve respect, from humans to birds, from whales to mice. When we are disrespectful of this connectedness to the whole web of life, we inflict damage not just on other creatures but unthinkingly on ourselves as well.

When we are heedless of our complex relationship to the natural world around us over time, the harm we do eventually boomerangs back on us. Lake Mead and the Colorado River are at almost historic lows. Hoover Dam and Lake Mead were built nearly a century ago, when no one imagined nearly 25 million people, including the populations of Las Vegas, Tucson, and Phoenix deciding to move there in the last half-century. To say nothing of the millions of acres of farmland now irrigated to grow cotton, wheat, alfalfa, citrus, and vegetables.

As urban sprawl engulfed these cities, no one asked what the region's carrying capacity might be, although John Wesley Powell who had surveyed the southwest in the 1870s warned in his report that overpopulation and over-farming would lead to disaster. "I tell you, gentlemen, you are piling up a heritage of conflict and litigation over water rights, for there is not enough water to supply the land," Powell wrote in 1893. Nonetheless short-term gain outweighed long-term risk.

The ancient mariner's curse is only lifted in Coleridge's poem when he repents of his thoughtless, selfish killing of the albatross. The mariner looks upon the horrible water snakes threatening the ship and blesses rather than curses them. In doing so he relinquishes his prejudice against other, supposedly lesser creatures and acknowledges their worth and the unbreakable connection his life has to theirs. When he blesses them, the dead albatross that the ship's crew has hung around his neck drops away and he is set free. Redemption comes through love, his ability to love other creatures beyond himself.

Coleridge concludes his tale with the lines that I recall my grandfather lingering over every time he read this poem to me as a child:

*He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.*

*He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.*

I understand those lines now in a way that would have been impossible to my pre-teen self.

Coleridge's poem, written in 1798 and on the cusp of the Industrial Revolution, has turned out to be prophetic of our current circumstances. It remains a profoundly Christian moral vision of our place as human beings in a web of life that encompasses all creatures great and small. It's a vision particularly important in a world where intense heat waves, wildfires, and dwindling reservoirs may be the albatross around our neck. And perhaps we will only be released from this albatross when we acquire a humility, compassion, and love that extends beyond ourselves and our generation to all living things both now and in coming generations.

Coleridge as the son of an Anglican vicar and himself ordained as a Church of England priest was undoubtedly familiar with these words from the prophet Ezekiel, "As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: ...' Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet and drink what you have fouled with your feet?'" (34:17-19)

Summer blessings!
Pastor Thomas

PASTRIES WITH PASTOR ON JULY 29

You are invited to an informal time with pastor Thomas for "Pastries with the pastor. We will gather on Wednesday, 7/29 in Butler Hall from 10:30 a.m. to noon. You are free to drop by for a few minutes to say hello or come for a longer chat.

I look forward to you joining me.

Pastor Thomas

THANK YOU NOTE from CHURCH WORLD SERVICE

When you place a few dollars in the envelope provided in your pew or mail a donation to the church... we share care beyond our own walls – helping families feel seen, supported and wrapped in compassion.

Thank you for your donations of \$196 for Church World Service Blanket Sunday and \$279 for Church World Service Tools of Hope Sunday.

Thank you for planting seeds of compassion. Thank you for helping hope take root.

SUMMER OFFICE HOURS

The office is 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 next weekly newsletter will be July 29.

KENSINGTON FOOD PANTRY

Our cupboards are bare. All the bins, boxes and tables are empty in our food pantry. We just finished another year of supplying food to families at Kensington School. Now we are planning for the next school year. Thru the summer we are hoping you can help us to fill all our shelves with good food to start helping families in September once again. When you are shopping for your own families, try to remember to pick up a few things for our Kensington Families. When you see a sale, a BOGO or are shopping at the Dollar Store, you can help us to be ready for the new school year in September. I will leave a stack of reusable grocery bags on the puzzle cupboard in the breezeway. If you would like to take one and fill it up during the summer, we would be so grateful to you for your help.

A Note from the Business & Finance Board

Owners of a traditional, rollover, inherited, SEP or SIMPLE IRAs, and who are older than 70 ½ can satisfy their annual required minimum distribution (RMD) by distributing the money directly to a charity of their choice. For example, if you want to pledge say \$2,000 to the church, this amount would be transferred directly from your IRA as a Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD) to the church's account and would reduce your RMD by that amount. This means that this money will not be added to your yearly income thus reducing your income tax. You will not get a charitable deduction for this money but since only 1/10th of taxpayers itemize this is a beneficial tradeoff.

Note: owners of 401k accounts can roll them into a rollover IRA.

IT IS HARD TO BELIEVE....

But school will be starting soon.

And some things never change. Kensington School continues to need our help. Our commitment to helping the needy students and their teachers there remains high.

The sales on school supplies will begin soon!! PLEASE purchase any school supplies and drop off in the breezeway or the big blue bin behind the church. If it is easier, you can just write a check, made out to the First Congregational Church marked for "school supplies". This enables the school to purchase in larger quantities at a lower cost specifically what they need as the school year progresses.

Our goal is to deliver the week of August 18.

The principal, staff and students thank you in advance for your continued generosity and dedication to this important mission. Providing tools for education changes lives.

PRAYER

Creator of all: We thank you for this summer season with its long days and azure skies. Draw us near to you in these summer days. When heat is dangerous, remind us to check on the well-being of the isolated and vulnerable around us. Warm our paths with the presence of you who are the Sun of Righteousness. Let your good creation create in us a hunger and thirst for you. Help us to find in every rock or bright star, every flowing fountain or growing flower a reminder of your beauty and gracious mercy as their Creator and ours. Amen.



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