

First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter

East Longmeadow, MA

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PASTORAL MEDITATION by Rev. Thomas Hawkins

IN THE MIDST OF CHANGING WAYS, GIVE US GRACE TO PRAISE

I've often thought that one reason Christians and churches are reluctant to change is because many of our hymns take a dim view of change. Time and change are seen as negative and equated with decay and decline. In "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" we sing of how, as time passes, our lives perish, *forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day*. The beloved hymn, "Abide With Me" likewise equates change with decay. In its second stanza we sing: *change and decay in all around I see*. Perhaps these composers had such a dim view of change because they lived before changes like the invention of antibiotics, electric lights, and air conditioning.

One of my favorites hymns is "Many Gifts, One Spirit." It refuses to identify change with decay and decline. Its composer, Alvin Allison (Al) Carmines, Jr., published "Many Gifts, One Spirit" in the 1970s. He has the unique distinction of having composed both church music and off-Broadway musicals. He was pastor of Rauschenbusch Memorial United Church of Christ in New York City as well as music professor at Columbia University. Carmines was awarded the Obie five times for Off-Broadway Theater productions and credited with over 80 operas and musical theater productions.

"Many Gifts, One Spirit" begins, *when we fear the future... give to us still the grace to praise*. Its verses assure us that God is at work in changing times in spite of our fears and worries. Ultimately our calling is not to bemoan unsettled times but to praise God in spite of our uncertainties and fear. For we see only in part and through a mirror darkly what the current moment may actually mean for our world and for ourselves. Trusting in a God of endless love and light, we are invited to let God's love cast out our fear so we may roll up our sleeves and lean into the future rather than push back against it.

"Many Gifts, One Spirit" is a hymn for times like ours. Thousand-year floods now happen every few years. Temperature records are broken with almost predictable regularity. News broadcasters relentlessly us how some political move or policy decision is "unprecedented." Even when we turn to our personal lives, transitions are inevitable; and few of us are eager to embrace changes that disrupt and disorient our lives: an unexpected, serious illness; an unanticipated move to a new home or city; a crisis in a relationship important to us.

It's not easy to live in crisis-plagued times nor to navigate inevitable personal transitions. The French novelist Anatole France once wrote, "All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy. For what we leave behind us is a part of ourselves."

Al Carmines' "Many Gifts, One Spirit" suggests how Christians can live amid our unsettling times:

*When we fear the future, give to us your grace.
In the midst of changing ways give us still the grace to praise....
One Giver, one Lord, one Spirit, one Word
Known in many ways, hallowing our days.
For the Giver, for the gifts, praise, praise, praise!...
As the old ways disappear, let your love cast out our fear.
Freshness of the morning, newness of each night,
You are still creating endless love and light.
This we see, as shadows part, many gifts from one great heart.*

During times like these, our fears cannot protect us. Only seeing the many gifts we are receiving from others around us – gifts that come in roundabout ways from God’s own great heart – can sustain our hope and strengthen our resolve. Praising the giver for these gifts helps us see them more clearly.

Praise is an extraordinary discipline in a *me-first* world where a focus on anything other than oneself and one’s own needs has seemingly disappeared. In a world that prioritizes sarcasm and insult and that elevates pettiness over fidelity to people and communities, praise is a counter-culturally practice.

Ironically, when we are most fearful, we are most likely to double down on what we already know rather than humbly admit that maybe we don’t have all the answers and open ourselves to new voices and new possibilities. Praise has the capacity to cultivate such humility. It is a form of generous attention to and valuing of something beyond and greater than ourselves.

It is no accident that the Good Book constantly calls us to praise and prayer. The Psalms, in particular, echo the praises of God. In the Hebrew scriptures, the Book of Psalms is entitled *Tehillim*, which literally means “Praises.” Psalm 150, for example, begins: *Praise the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise God in the mighty heavens. Praise God’s acts of power; praise God for God’s surpassing greatness.*

The prophet Jeremiah proclaims that God created Israel as a people bound to their God by praise (13:11). When Jewish communities gather for worship, they sing God’s praises. This focus on the praise of God has helped to sustain them through Babylonian exile, Roman diaspora, and 20th-century’s pogroms and the Holocaust. The earliest Christians likewise believed they were called into a community created to praise God’s glory. (Ephesians 1:12) The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins with the statement that the chief end of humankind is to glorify and praise God; and John Calvin wrote that “prayer and praise according to the Word of God are the heart of the Church’s worship.”

We begin worship every Sunday with a hymn of adoration and praise. Later in the service, we unite our voices in a song we know by heart: *Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise God, all creatures here below. Praise God above, ye heavenly hosts.* When we sing our praise of God Sunday by Sunday, we are reminding ourselves that we are a community called and sustained by a God who is always with us and is constantly working to bring forth good from life’s messy conditions. Our praise also cultivates a humility of spirit that reminds us that the things we think, value, or believe are not divine oracles to which others must agree or submit; but instead the One greater than any of us has ideas and gifts to share beyond any we can imagine possible. In the midst of fear and uncertainty, our songs of praise teach us to be confident in God’s many gifts that come to us as we live in Christian community with each other and that help us to cope and create amid unsettling times – all coming to us from One Great Heart seeking to hallow our days.

For the Giver, for the gifts, praise, praise, praise!...
Pastor Thomas

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

PUB THEOLOGY

In case you missed this!!! What is “Pub Theology”? It’s a fun night out with friends from church, sharing a meal together, maybe even having a beer. It is a wonderful way to spend time with and to get to know each other better. We will meet regularly the 1st Tuesday of each month. **Next “meeting” August 4.** Mark your calendar, hope to see you there!

SUNDAY MORNING COFFEE HOUR

For various reasons our teams are a bit understaffed for Sunday morning Coffee Hour. Each team (for 3 months throughout the year) is responsible to set up, make coffee and provide a few snacks, then clean up Butler Hall and the kitchen. If you might be interested in helping out, please speak to any member hosting. Thank you.

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.

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.

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 August 12th.

PRAYER

God of Time and History: Protect us from faithless fears and anxieties. Grant that no clouds of doubt and fear may obscure the many gifts that come from you through the one Holy Spirit working in faithful lives around us to do what is good and true and caring. In the midst of changing times and as the foundations beneath old certainties are shaken, give us grace to praise you for their gifts and for you the Giver. Amen.



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

7 Somers Road, East Longmeadow, MA 01028

Web: churchontherotary.org ~ email: office@churchontherotary.org ~ 413.525.4121