

First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter

East Longmeadow, MA

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PASTORAL MEDITATION by Rev. Thomas Hawkins

SWEETER THAN HONEY TO OUR MOUTHS

When Jan and I were planting our flower gardens, we wanted them to be pollinator-friendly. One of the perennials we chose was anise hyssop (*Agastache foeniculum*), which despite its common name is related neither to hyssop nor to anise. Its leaves when broken or crushed do however have a licorice-like scent. Anise hyssop's flower spikes are three to six inches long and covered in small, densely packed blue-purple blossoms.

This week there are so many bees gathering pollen on the anise hyssop that I can hear their buzzing long before I walk near them. I look out the window now and see butterflies hovering around these flowers. More recently, I've noticed goldfinches arriving to feast on their seeds.

Watching all these hard-working bees gathering pollen inspired me to do some research on bees and their habits. I learned that bees are hard-working single mothers, clever architects, and fierce warriors. I discovered that there are 20,000 different species of bees around the world, including 4,000 species in the United States.

Our Creator must have a fondness for bees because they have been on earth for nearly 100 million years., co-evolving with the emergence of flowers in the Early Cretaceous Era. Our human ancestors have been gathering honey for at least the last 9,000 years. No wonder, then, that there are over 60 references to bees in the bible, which puts them on a par with references to camels! The biblical heroine Deborah's name in Hebrew actually means "bee."

Honeybees and honey are usually cited as examples of God's blessings and divine abundance. When Jacob sends his sons to Egypt during a famine, he sends gifts with them to use when they barter for grain to bring back to Palestine. These gifts include "a little balm and a little honey, spices and myrrh, nuts and almonds." Later, Moses identifies the Promised Land as a "land flowing with milk and honey." In the New Testament, Mark and Matthew describe John the Baptizer as living in the desert and surviving on a diet of locusts and wild honey provided by God's abundance and generous care.

Because honey could be stored for long periods of time, it became a symbol of everlasting life. In Luke's gospel, the Risen Jesus appears to his disciples after the resurrection and they give him a piece of fish and honeycomb to eat. When Howard Carter opened the Pharaoh Tutankhamun's tomb, he found two sealed jars containing honey meant to sustain King Tut through eternity. When Samson scoops up the honeycomb from the lion's dead carcass, the early church interpreted this honey as a sign of how God is always bringing forth something life-giving and sweet from what seems like a dead carcass of life.

With the rise of monasticism, beekeeping became an important occupation for monks. Bees were important for pollinating fruits and vegetables in their cloister gardens and the monks saw in them a model for collaboration in the body of Christ. Just as in the church there are many members each with specific gifts and responsibilities, all of whom must work together, so different bees in a hive have different tasks they must perform through cooperation and collaboration. These monks also saw bees as examples of hard

work and diligence. After all, honeybees have to visit two million flowers to produce just one pound of honey. No wonder they beat their wings 200 per second and fly up to 20 mph as they search for flowers and pollen.

Because they lived in close proximity to bees and had ample time to observe their behavior, monks and Christian mystics frequently used bees to illustrate important spiritual lessons. The 17th-century spiritual director St. Francis de Sales, for example, says that a bee “collects honey from flowers in such a way as to do the least damage or destruction to them, and he leaves them whole, undamaged and fresh, just as he found them.” In the same way we are to live peaceably and do no harm to others. Elsewhere de Sales writes that bees suggest how we are to face life’s difficult challenges “Look at the bees amid the banks of thyme.” He writes, “They found there a very bitter juice, but when they sucked it out, they changed it into sweet honey.” St. John Chrysostom, another early church theologian and preacher, used bees as an example of Christian self-giving service to others: ““The bee is more honored than other animals, not because it labors, but because it labors for others” (*12th Homily*).

There’s a medieval Jewish tradition that compares honey’s sweetness to the sweetness that we should feel when we grow in the knowledge, love, and service of God. When young children went off to school for the first time, the rabbi or teacher would hand them a slate tablet on which the letters of the Hebrew alphabet were written in honey. The children were instructed to lick the honey from the tablet and taste the sweetness of learning God’s word. Then the rabbi would read a blessing based on Psalm 119:103 - “May the words of God be sweet to your taste, sweeter than honey to your mouth. May the words of God be the most pleasurable, the most enjoyable thing you could ever comprehend.” The rabbi or teacher would then invite them to remember that learning to walk in God’s ways and learn God’s Word are always to be as sweet as honey in their mouths.

May we too find it so,
Pastor Thomas

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

KENSINGTON FOOD PANTRY

Thank you, Thank you!!

Once again, you have answered our call to help those in need.

The shelves are filling with canned vegetables, fruit, beans and pasta sauce. The bins are filled with rice, pasta, crackers, cereal boxes and of course, cookies. These are kids and their families that we are feeding after all. So there must be cookies. The families at Kensington are so in need of the little extras that we can provide easily to help them out. I thank you so very much for making this possible. As I always say, this congregation really knows how to share God’s love.

ALTAR FLOWERS

The flower committee invites you to remember, and honor loved ones or offer celebration for a joyous event. We have following open dates: August 23 & 30, September 6 & 27, All Sundays in November! Call the church office if you are interested or sign up in Butler Hall.

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 on August 26th.

PRAYER

August 1st is the traditional date for the English, Scottish, and Irish traditions of Lammas Day or Lughnasadh. Fields have turned from green to golden; and the fullness of the harvest has begun. Lammas was the day on which parishioners brought a loaf of bread baked from the recently harvest to their church to be blessed as a sign of thanksgiving for God's gift of the daily bread we ask when we pray The Lord's Prayer. We are not agricultural people who celebrate the harvest of wheat and barley. But we do know the fullness of the summer's harvest from our vegetable gardens: tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, beans as well as melons, peaches, and blueberries. So this week's prayer is a traditional prayer for Lammas Day, adapted from a Church of England resource for Lammas Day.

Creator God, you made the goodness of the soil and land, the rich harvest of the sea, and the rhythm of the seasons. May we respect cherish, and care for this planet and its peoples. For the promise of harvest within the seed, we thank you:

For the oak tree within the acorn.

For the apple tree within the seed.

For the bread within the grain.

For the dawn in every darkness

For the bulb in every flower.

Pour your blessing upon all creation and upon us, your people. May we always tend the earth, care for your creation, and bring forth the fruit of righteousness you have planted within us. Amen.



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

7 Somers Road, East Longmeadow, MA 01028

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