

First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter

East Longmeadow, MA

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PASTORAL MEDITATION by Rev. Thomas Hawkins

LET YOUR WORDS BE SEASONED AND GRACIOUS

Jan and I enjoyed visiting our son and his family last week. Each time we visit, we're amazed at our older granddaughter's growing ability to speak and express herself. She has become quite a conversationalist after celebrating her second birthday back in the spring. She's mastered lots of new words as well as the grammar for how to string individual words together into complete thoughts.

The Bible has quite a bit to say about speech and our mastery of words. The Old Testament begins with God speaking a word that creates a world. We typically translate the Hebrew *dabar* that's used in Genesis 1 into English as "word." It comes from the parent root DR, which means "order." A word is an ordered arrangement of sounds that express a meaning or purpose.

Without words, the world is what 19th-century American philosopher and psychologist William James called a "buzzing, blooming confusion." For William James, a newborn like our granddaughter's little sister (whom we met for the first time last week) experiences an overwhelming cacophony of sights, sounds, and sensations that flood the mind before the brain develops the capacity to order and structure all this sensory information. Language – words and speech – allow us to order and structure our sensory experience so that we can understand our world. In the same way, the ancient Hebrews thought that our Creator's word (*dabar*) brings order and structure to the cosmos. Centuries later and writing in Greek, John's Gospel echoes the same idea about the power of words. According to John, the Word "was in the beginning with God and all things came into being through the Word." (1:2) God literally "spoke" the cosmos into being.

Words are not just a jumble of sounds. They call into existence something ordered and structured. The Hebrew word *dabar* suggests words as something factual and real. This is why the Old Testament does not speak of "the Ten Commandments." In Hebrew, they are called the "Ten Words" (*debariym*, which is the plural of *dabar*). Just as God speaks and the world is both created and ordered, so God's words to Moses call into being a social order that describes how a people are to live together in harmony and mutuality.

Words that create and order the world have an objective life of their own. They are, to the Hebrew mind, facts. And facts do not just float away into the ether once they are spoken and heard. They are stubborn things not easily erased once spoken. Thus, after Jacob steals Esau's blessing, Isaac cannot just retract the blessing that he has spoken (*dabar*) to Jacob. Isaac's blessing has become a "fact" that cannot be wiped away. (Genesis 27) Once spoken, a word sets things in motion that cannot be retracted. Isaac taking back the blessing that Jacob has tricked him into giving is like trying to put toothpaste back in the tube after you've squeezed it out.

Because words are facts that create and order reality, the bible is constantly instructing people to be careful with the words they speak or write. Words are objects thrust out into the world that can harm or heal. They create realities that take on a life of their own. As Proverbs 12:8 says, "A rash speaker is like piercings of a sword, and the tongue of the wise is healing." Or as the Book of James warns, "If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire. And the tongue is a fire." (3:1-6)

Our words have consequences. They create facts in other people's lives. They can make us feel love or anger, fear or hope. They can unsettle or calm troubled waters. Words are how we "order" our world as the Old Testament suggests; and they can also light fires of disorder as the Book of James warns.

According to the Stimson Center, we are awash in a sea of words. Facebook sees approximately 300 million new photos uploaded daily, while six thousand “tweets” are sent every second. Each of us speaks about 12,000 words every day. Immersed in so many words, it’s easy to forget the power of words to create a reality out there in the world. Our words order our world or contribute to its disorder and dysfunction. How many of our words are positive words? How much of our speech is negative? How much builds up and how much tears down? Do they build understanding or do they tear apart communities and relationships? What kind of world are our words creating? My hope for our two grandchildren, for everyone’s children and grandchildren, is that they grow up in a world ordered by words of hope and care, not disordered by words of anger, fear, and hostility. As the author of Colossians says, “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.” (4:6).

Blessings,
Pastor Thomas

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

ADULT BOOK STUDY

Pastor Thomas will host an adult book study this fall. Our book(s) will be two short novellas by Irish author Clair Keegan. Both are short. *Small Things Like These* is approximately 110 pages and can be read in a couple of hours. *The Foster* is less than 100 pages. *Small Things Like These* is also listed by the New York Times as one of the 100 best books of the 21st century. *The Foster* was produced as a film in Ireland and won a 2023 Academy Award nomination for best foreign film.

We will meet after worship on Sunday, September 20, from 11:45 – 12:45 to discuss *Small Things Like These* and on Sunday, October 12, from 11:45 – 12:45 to discuss *The Foster*.

The Western Massachusetts interlibrary loan system has 127 hard copies of *Small Things Like These* and 107 copies of *The Foster*.

Small Things Like These, according to the publisher’ is set “in a small Irish town. During the weeks leading up to Christmas, Bill Furlong, a coal merchant and family man faces into his busiest season. Early one morning, while delivering an order to the local convent, Bill makes a discovery which forces him to confront both his past and the complicit silences of a town controlled by the church.” It “is a deeply affecting story of hope, quiet heroism, and empathy...”

The Foster, writes the publisher, “is story of childhood, loss, and love... It is a hot summer in rural Ireland. A child is taken by her father to live with relatives on a farm, not knowing when or if she will be brought home again. In the Kinsellas’ house, she finds an affection and warmth she has not known and slowly, in their care, begins to blossom. But there is something unspoken in this new household-where everything is so well tended to-and this summer must soon come to an end.”

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: September 6 & 27, All Sundays in November!
Call the church office if you are interested or sign up in Butler Hall.

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Sunday School will begin on 9/13; Youth Group will begin on 9/13 from 6-7:30pm

PASTRIES WITH the PASTOR on September 16

You are invited to an informal time with pastor Thomas for "Pastries with the Pastor". We will gather 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

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 September 9th.

PRAYER

Bless to us, O God, this week, made fresh. In the chorus of birds, bless us. In the wet grass and late-summer flowers, bless us. Bless us, O Lord, because we come to you in love and in trust. Fill our hearts with hope and quiet our fears about ourselves, about those we love, about our world; and grant us the wisdom to know your will and the courage to do it. Amen.



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