

September 16, 2026



PASTORAL MEDITATION by Rev. Thomas Hawkins

AUTUMN LEAVES AND THE BEAUTY BORN BEFORE OUR EYES

Autumn is in the air. Last night, the temperature dropped into the 40s. It's not just falling temperatures that let me know autumn is fast approaching. It's also the trees. There are glimpses of color here and there as the leaves on a few branches turn red, yellow, or orange while the rest of the tree stays green.

These patches of colorful leaves amid the green ones started me wondering why the leaves on one branch would change colors while all the others remain dressed in summer green. Why doesn't the whole tree change all at the same time? Why don't all trees everywhere lose their green leaves at the same time?

Some sources I consulted observed that outer leaves, which are more exposed to sunlight and temperatures, are quicker to change colors than those deeper inside the tree's canopy. Another writer opined that whether a branch is on the north-facing side of a tree or on the south-facing side determines the speed at which its leaves change colors. South-facing leaves receive more sunlight than those on the north side. Hence, they respond more quickly to shorter days and cooler temperatures. Still others attributed the spotty nature of color changes to pest damage, stress from compacted soil, immature roots, road salt, or drought. Stressed trees and their leaves change sooner. This, I realized, is probably why newly transplanted trees along the highway seem to change colors and drop their leaves before more mature trees growing in moister and richer soil.

Finally, arborists divide trees into two groups when it comes to leaf production and loss. Leaves on trees like birch, willow, ash, and poplar open each spring according to an inside-to-outside pattern and continue to add leaves in several flushes through the summer. Likewise, in the fall, they lose leaves from the inside and oldest first. Leaves on trees like oak, cherry, and maple follow the opposite pattern. Their leaves appear all in one flush during the spring; then, in autumn, they change color and drop in an outside-to-inside sequence. Both outside-in and inside-out trees can thus simultaneously bear both green and autumn-colored leaves.

Of course, there are contrarians who propose that there's no real scientific explanation for why some leaves change earlier than other ones do. Why? Because trees, like people, have their own unique genetic and environmental profile. All of us are *homo sapiens*. But just like trees, some of us are tall and others short. Some have blond hair; others, brown. Some of us age more quickly than others. And, when we do age, we usually don't face the same health challenges on identical schedules. Even within one person, his or her social, cognitive, and emotional skills are not always in sync with each other as they grow and change. The pace of someone's cognitive development can lag behind the speed at which their social skills develop. In this sense we as individuals are similar to lemon trees, which can have both mature and immature lemons growing on them at the same time. Or the hickory tree in my backyard that is mostly green but has one yellow branch of leaves.

Reading about all the nuances of how and when leaves change colors has made me better appreciate the changing landscape around me. It has also encourage me to think differently about myself and others. Despite our all being branches on one human family tree, some of us grow from the inside out; others from the outside in. We're all at different stages and phases of life because the "microclimates" where we've been planted, along with our own particular genetic inheritance, make each of us unique. Some of us have been exposed to more stress than others. Some of us have had a drought of love and support; others of us have been planted in well-watered and rich soils. All these factors affect how we think, act, and relate to others. Just because we look differently and change at different rates does not make us any less beautiful in God's eyes.

When I look through my window and see a single tree branch whose leaves are yellow in a sea of green, maybe the best thing I can do is appreciate how God's glory shines in each leaf as it shares its unique beauty with the world. Maybe too that's how I can approach those whose lives intersect with mine. Sociologist Margaret Mead once wrote, "Always remember that you are absolutely unique. Just like everyone else." Or as Paul writes to the church in Rome: "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." (15:5-7)

With prayer,
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 11, from 11:45 – 12:45 to discuss *The Foster*.

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 are all Sundays in November and December 20!
Call the church office if you are interested or sign up in Butler Hall.

NOTE FROM YOUR MODERATOR

Greetings First Congregational Church members, family and friends

I wanted to update everyone on some projects that are happening at the church.

First, we are closing off access to the red front doors until further notice. We knew there was an issue with the front steps sinking a bit, but closer inspection revealed a larger issue where the front step structure itself is pulling away from the foundation and also the middle step is not stable. We are in touch with a structural engineering firm who is doing an assessment and will provide us with a plan to correct this issue. There is a sign on the doors stating to please use the breezeway for entrance into the church. During services in the sanctuary, we will have the front doors unlocked as an emergency egress only.

Another project is to establish and paint a Fire Lane No Parking zone on the front driveway, on the church curbside from Prospect Street to Somers Road. We can still park on the rotary side of the front driveway, just not on the church side. For the fairs we can still have folks load and unload their vehicles for setup and take down, as long as they move their vehicles immediately afterwards. We will also figure out the best way to still allow the local sports booster clubs to do car washes. This is from our safety and security survey which was conducted last Tuesday by East Longmeadow Police and Fire Departments and an agent from the Critical Infrastructure Protection Program of the Department of Homeland Security.

There are many other projects in play of various sizes, some seen and unseen, ongoing regularly. As always, a huge THANK YOU to our Wednesday workgroup of volunteers who keep things maintained and updated (more than just on Wednesdays by the way!) and our church leadership, staff and boards for their focus and attention to the small details so they do not become major issues. Enjoy the seasonal transition from Summer to Fall!

BELL CHOIR

You are invited to play bells! Rehearsals are at 9 am on Sunday mornings.

A BIG THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTINUED GENEROSITY

Your Mission and Outreach Committee appreciates your continuous support of any and all projects that we propose each month. We offer a variety of missions and are always open to new ideas. Thanks to you, we recently delivered several bags of donated school supplies, along with a check for \$620 to Kensington school. We also donated \$196 for Blanket Sunday, and \$279 for Tools of Hope.

Starting October 1 until Thanksgiving, we will once again start collecting new and/or gently used warm clothing for our neighbors in need right here in the Springfield area. As you switch out your wardrobe, remember that your donation can keep someone warm as the cold season will be here before we know it. More info will be coming soon.

Mission & Outreach

PRAYER

O You who are the Creator of earth and sky and sea: The heavens proclaim your glory and the earth is ablaze with your goodness. As the seasons change around us, we rejoice in your wonderful works. May changing leaves and warm sunbeams fill us like a honeycomb with all the fullness of your grace. Amen.



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