

September 9, 2026



PASTORAL MEDITATION by Rev. Thomas Hawkins

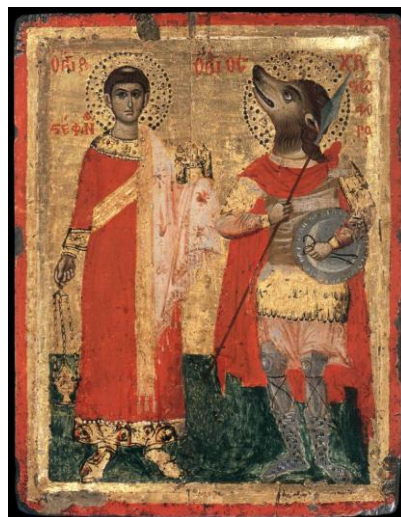
LESSONS FROM A DOG-HEADED SAINT

Despite record high gas prices, some 61 million people packed the highways this past Labor Day weekend. Another 17 million crowded into airports and millions more boarded trains. Some undoubtedly were wearing St. Christopher medallions that depict the saint as a bearded ferryman wading across a river carrying a small child on his shoulders and that read “St. Christopher, protect us.”

St. Christopher is venerated as the patron saint of travelers, motorists, and athletes. According to legend, a 3rd-century Christian hermit once told a warrior named Reprobos (“The Reprobate”) that if he wanted to serve the mightiest King of all, then he should become a ferryman bearing travelers across a dangerous river. One day a child asked Reprobos to carry him across the river. Reprobos hoisted the child onto his shoulders and waded into the river. As they crossed deeper into the waters, the child grew heavier and heavier until Reprobos could hardly bear his weight. Once they reached the other shore, the child revealed himself as the Christ and explained to the ferryman that he had been carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. After this encounter Reprobos took the name of Christopher, which means “light-bearer,” and became a missionary who was later martyred in the 3rd-century Decian persecution.

This legend, however, is not the only, nor the earliest, legend of St. Christopher. It first appears in a 13th-century collection of stories about early saints entitled *The Golden Legend*. Until then St. Christopher had been described as a convert to Christianity from a dog-headed people who lived somewhere east of modern Iran. In the 6th-century *Acts of Andrew and Bartholomew*, these two disciples have gone to Parthia to preach the gospel. After a series of fantastic adventures, they journey onward to the east, hoping to convert a civilization of dog-headed cannibals among whom Andrew and Barnabus will convert the future St. Christopher. Although previously only able to bark (and having a taste for human flesh), as you would expect of a monstrous creature who is half-human and half-dog, Christopher is given the gift of human speech so that henceforth he can spread the Word of God. He is then martyred during the 3rd-century Decian persecution and elevated into his dog-headed sainthood.

As curious and unlikely as this version of St. Christopher’s life may sound, it was extremely popular during the Middle Ages and persisted into the 18th century among Russian Christians when Czar Peter the Great made icons of a dog-headed St. Christopher illegal, believing such icons like the one below made Russian Christians look backward and foolish.



But this dog-headed saint's popularity wasn't limited to Eastern Christianity. You find his image everywhere in Medieval Western Europe, like in this one from a 10th-century English manuscript.



It would be easy to dismiss such paintings, manuscript illustrations, and icons as something produced on the bizarre fringes of medieval Christendom. On the other hand, a dog-headed St. Christopher reminds us of an important Christian truth that we can all too easily forget in our contemporary world.

These earliest St. Christopher legends and icons describe a foreign outsider who appears monstrous because he doesn't speak our language or resemble us in any way; yet is converted, given voice, and made a martyr and saint, which is to become early Christianity's ultimate insider. A dog-headed St. Christopher doesn't reflect mere ignorance of geography or human anatomy. These images are not fanciful decorations painted by bored Medieval monks laboring away on illuminated manuscripts and icons. They seek to convey an important, if uncomfortable truth.

A dog-headed, monstrous looking St. Christopher is most alien figure available to the imagination of medieval Christianity. His appearance is of someone from a distant land whom we do not experience as fully human. He is "not one of us." We would not be at home in his world and he is alien to our homeland. Yet this foreign "reprobate" is christened with the name "Light-Bearer." St. Christopher is the ultimate outsider and stranger who has the potential to become a gift-bearing neighbor in Christ.

The stranger and the foreigner are not always threatening monsters. They may instead be Christophers – "light-bearers." Paul tells the Ephesians that "now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility . . . Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone." (2:13-14, 19-20).

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 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: September 27, all Sundays in November and December 20 & 27! 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

BELL CHOIR

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

PRAYER

Be with us all, O Lord, in this week after Labor Day. Give us compassion for all who work long hours and in difficult or dangerous jobs to provide life's necessities for their families. Be especially with those who perform the often invisible work of cleaning homes and hospitals, caring for children in daycare, and maintaining our lawns and landscapes. As we go about the busyness of our daily routines, keep us mindful of those around us, their work and their needs. For they are close to the heart of You who labored with your hands at the hard work of a carpenter. Amen.



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

7 Somers Road, East Longmeadow, MA 01028

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