First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter
East Longmeadow, MA

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PASTORAL MEDITATION by Rev. Thomas Hawkins

PILGRIMAGE ALONG A SACRED WAY OF WAR AND PEACE

Last summer I walked a section of the Via Francigena, the medieval pilgrim trail from Canterbury to Rome. Unbeknownst to me, much of this pilgrim route follows the static trench lines of the First World War. If the Via Francigena is about pilgrimage, another, more recent long-distance hiking trail - the Western Front Way - is about perspectives on war and peace.

The Western Front Way snakes its way over 600 miles between the Swiss border and the Belgian coast. Along it, one encounters trenches, bunkers, battlefields, memorials, museums, and cemeteries from World War One. Creating this long-distance hiking path was inspired by a letter written home by a soldier in the Argyll and Sunderland Highlanders, Alexander Douglas Gillespie. Written shortly before he was killed in combat in 1915, he wrote: *I would like to send every man, woman and child in Western Europe on a pilgrimage along that Via Sacra so that they might think and learn what war means from the silent witnesses on either side."*

Looking out over a desolate and devastated No Man's Land, he dreamed that after the war he *would make a fine broad road in the no man's land between the lines, with paths for pilgrims on foot and plant trees for shade and fruit trees, so that the soil should not altogether be waste* and so that people of all countries could *come and walk and remember what happened here and think about future peace.* Gillespie's letter lay forgotten in an attic trunk for over a century until his descendants found it and began to fulfil their forebearer's dream. It finally opened just a few years ago.

Every meter on the Western Front Way represents 17 soldiers or civilians who lost their lives in The Great War. Total deaths in WW1 are estimated to be 15-22 million. Another 20 million were not killed but suffered as casualties of war. An estimated 1.5 to 1.75 billion artillery shells were shot, causing more than 60% to 70% of all casualties. It was not just individuals who disappeared from the face of the earth between 1914 and 1918. Whole towns and villages also vanished. They were destroyed as one army and then another swept back-and-forth over them. After the war, many were never rebuilt. On my long-distance hike, I stayed one night in a village named Corbeny. In 1918, not a single building was left standing. It was not re-built by villagers and the French government until the 1920s.

The scale of death and destruction during WW1 is hard to grasp. The Battle of Verdun raged for 300 days and 300 nights, during which 26 million artillery shells were fired. 700,000 soldiers were wounded, and 300,000 were killed on both sides. After the end of the war, The French government was left asking what to do with the over 130,000 bodies at Verdun who could not be identified. An ossuary to hold their remains was built as a shrine and memorial. The word 'Pax' is engraved above the door. On either side of the Douaumont Ossuary are memorials to Jewish and Muslim soldiers who fought for France and died in combat.

As a teenager my uncle who had spent 30 years in the US Air Force showed me around Washington DC. I remember visiting the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier with him. Like the Douaumont Ossuary near Verdun, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was built to contain the unidentified remains of a First World War soldier. Remains from our other 20th-century wars have been added since the 1920s. My uncle spoke of it as a symbol of sacrifice and service. He also called it a symbol of our aspirations for peace. No monument in our nation's capital was more respected and venerated by my uncle than the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

This week as we observe Veterans Day, I've been thinking about my time along the Western Front Way where I learned so much about the horrors of World War One. I've also thought about the centrality of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, which was created in response to our losses in that same war, to our observation of Veterans Day. The sacrifices of the great wars of the 20th century are fading from our memory. No one is alive who fought in World

War One. Those of my parents' generation who fought in World War Two are rapidly disappearing. We no longer have these generations to remind us of the terrible devastation of war, although veterans of our more recent conflicts from Vietnam to Afghanistan are among us as reminders of the costs of war.

Unlike Europe, our landscape is not littered with WW1 and WW2 museums, ossuaries, and cemeteries that dot Europe's landscape. Alexander Gillespie's vision of a Western Front Way envisioned a pilgrimage walk where future generations would *come and walk and remember what happened here and think about future peace.* When I was in Reims as part of my Via Francigena walk, I visited the museum for Eisenhower's headquarters where the conclusion of WW2 was negotiated. On the wall is a quote from Paul Eluard, who was scarred in WW1 and fought in the French Resistance during WW2: *If the echo of their voices grows faint, we will perish*. When our memory of war's devastation, the ancient temptation to glorify the carnage of war re-emerges, once shaped by epic poems and paintings but now shaped by video games and movies.

We need to remember and honor the sacrifices and service of those who have suffered through war if we are to be people who work for peace and justice in our world. For my uncle who was a veteran of both WW2 and the Korean War, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier represented a memorial that kept the echo of his voice and the voices of those he fought alongside from growing faint. It was both a symbol of sacrifice and service and also a symbol of our need to pursue peace. The words of Psalm 34 are not inscribed on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier but perhaps they should be written on our hearts: "Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days, keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking likes. Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it." (12-14)

With prayer,
Pastor Thomas

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

THANKSGIVING FOOD COLLECTION

Once again, we are going to have a Thanksgiving food collection. If you would like to participate and fill a bag or two, there are extra a grocery bags in the breezeway. Please collect some non-perishable food items that we will use to serve the families in need at Kensington School.

Some examples of items you could put in your bag are:
rice, pasta, pasta sauce, peanut butter, jelly/jam, soups, crackers, cookies, cereal, tuna or canned chicken, canned vegetables or fruit, snack cups of fruit/applesauce, etc.

Please bring the bags back to church by Sunday November 22 and place them on the altar. The staff at Kensington and the families we serve are so appreciative of our help. We all have much to be thankful for at this time of the year. One of the things I am thankful for is this caring and supportive church family. Thank you so much for your continued support and for sharing God's love with our Kensington families.

CHURCH FAIR FOLLOW UP!

Dear Church Family,

We each know the vast labor of love that goes into creating our well-known, well-renowned Christmas Collection Craft Fair. I heard from nearly all our vendors, both veteran and new, that our fair now sets the standard for them. What a glorious acknowledgement of our combined efforts! There are so many moving pieces that make this fair such a success, and our small committee could never accomplish such a large project without your help! Each and every person who works in any manner to the success of our largest fundraiser, is deeply appreciated.
Our efforts leading up to November 7th, plus subsequent basket, plant and cheese sales have resulted in $10,361! I've mentioned this multiple times; however, it still remains true for me. I see our shared efforts at The Christmas Collection Craft Fair as one of my favorite living examples of 1 Corinthians: 12-14 "*The body is not supported by one person, but by all of us. We are one, we are strongest working together in unity".*

TO ALL THE VOLUNTEERS HUGE…

Thank you!!

This year's craft fair was another huge success, and that was in no small part due to the tremendous participation of our congregation. One of my jobs on the craft fair committee is getting people to staff the work areas. Tonight I counted at least 44 different members of our congregation who helped on the day of the fair! And that number does not include those who helped set up, clean up, make apple crisp, bake for the bake sale, bring plants for the plant room; nor does that number reflect all those who came and shopped, and thereby supported the crafters and made their experience so amazing that they want to continue to be a part of our fair. I am always so grateful to everyone who says yes when I ask (and trust me, everyone does). You are the ones who make this fair run as smoothly as it does year after year, and I am forever grateful.

KEEPING CHILDREN WARM

What child doesn't lose a hat or a pair of mittens at least once during the cold winter? Please help us fill the basket in the breezeway with new or gently used hats, gloves, mittens and scarves for the children at Kensington School to keep them warm...because we care. Neighbors helping neighbors in need, it's what we do so well. Thank you so much!

YOU HAVE ALREADY NOTICED...IT'S GETTING COLD

As you are once again able to take out your heavier winter clothes, remember that you have neighbors who have nothing to keep them warm. The First Congregational Church on the rotary will once again be collecting **gently used, clean, warm clothing** until **NOVEMBER 22** for men, women and children (even infants and toddlers). NOW we will also collect **CLEAN,** warm blankets. Everything will be donated to the critical work of the Springfield Rescue Mission serving your neighbors in the greater Springfield area.

Please place your donations in the box in the breezeway, or the big, blue bin outside. We accept warm clothing: coats, sweaters, vests, sweatshirts, hats, scarves, gloves, mittens, boots, etc. We also ask for **NEW** socks and underwear. Thank you for caring and taking the time to go through your closets. Your continued generosity will warm the lives of our neighbors in need during the coming cold winter months. Mission & Outreach

PRAYER

Holy and Loving God, we give you thanks for the veterans among us, those living and the saints who have gone before us. You know that many of our veterans, families, caregivers and communities suffer and you feel that pain in their lives. O merciful Savior, bring healing to those veterans who still hurt. Remind us of the immediate and long-term costs of war in human lives so that we might be renewed in our commitment to do good and to seek peace and pursue it. Amen.

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