

2024 Lenten Devotional  
*Written by Teri McDowell Ott and others*

# Local Pilgrim

*A Wandering, Wondering Daily Devotional*



THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK

# Local Pilgrim

A Wandering, Wondering Daily Devotional

When I was a kid, I loved Louis Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy*, which is about an 11-year-old girl who records observations about her community in her treasured notebook. Harriet's spy work leads her to learn and reflect on local happenings, from the family who owns the local grocery store and is worried about maintaining their business, to Little Joe, their delivery boy, who is sneaking the store's produce to hungry children. Harriet eventually gets in trouble for her spying, when her friends find her notebook and have their feelings hurt by judgments Harriet has recorded. But by the end of the book, Harriet learns important lessons in empathy, and is given a new role to take advantage of her gifts — editor of her school newspaper.

The idea for these Local Pilgrim Lent devotions arose from my fond memories of *Harriet the Spy* and all she discovered through careful observation. I also wanted to know my community better. Our family moved to Harrisonburg, Virginia, in June of 2022, but I hadn't taken time to explore beyond the places my errands take me. These "local pilgrimages" led me, notebook in hand, to some wonderful places — an inclusive playground built for children of all abilities, an arboretum I had always wanted to visit but never made time for, and my public library that welcomes and respects everyone who enters. I also ventured to places I'd never have gone without an assignment: a city bus, a seedy bar, a cemetery, the waiting room of our local hospital. Other writers of this "local pilgrim" series ventured to places equally beautiful and mundane, as a sacred exercise in attending to whatever God lays before us in our lives and our communities.

I've been blessed by this Lenten series, purposefully exploring, discovering and reflecting on my community. Lent is the perfect season for a pilgrimage such as this, leading to meaningful contemplation and sacred discoveries. As you make your way through this devotional, you might find yourself inspired to go somewhere new; or somewhere familiar with a notebook in hand; to pause, ponder and pray. What will God reveal to you? I trust your pilgrimage will bless you just as "Local Pilgrim" has blessed me.

Teri

**Teri McDowell Ott**, Editor, *Presbyterian Outlook*



# Contributors

**Rev. Dr. Amantha Barbee** is an active member of the Presbytery of Charlotte and works for A-Corp, an agency of the PC(USA) as a ministry engagement advisor.

**Katie Crowe** is the senior pastor of Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church in Durham, North Carolina. Before that, she served as associate minister for service and mission at First Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, North Carolina.

**David Dendy**, whose mantra in life is “*Laugh often and Fear not!*”, serves the Mountain View Presbyterian Church in Las Vegas, Nevada (Sin City!). He loves to hike, play tennis and perform stand-up comedy, and he is the author of 15 books.

**Colin Farmer** is a journalism and anthropology student at Rochester Institute of Technology. He is a creative writer, saxophone player and a member of Central Presbyterian Church in Avon, New York.

**Dartinia Hull** is managing editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook*. She received her Master of Fine Arts/Creative Writing from Queens University in Charlotte, North Carolina.

**Noé Juarez** is the pastor at First Presbyterian church in Goldsboro, North Carolina, and is married to Laurie and has two teenagers. He grew up in Peru and completed his Master of Divinity at Union Presbyterian Seminary and Doctor of Ministry at Columbia Theological Seminary.

**Ellen Martin** is a 16-year-old student at a public Montessori magnet high school who enjoys caring for small-to-medium animals, flying through the air on Cirque apparatus, and creating a wide variety of artistic expressions. She lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, with her parents where she and her devoted cat, Willow, enjoy playing tag.

**Tovi Martin** is a nonprofit communications professional who lives in Charlotte with her husband, teenage daughter and a ridiculously sweet cat. She is a graduate of Queens University of Charlotte, was baptized as an adult and currently serves as a ruling elder in a PC(USA) congregation.

**Teri McDowell Ott** is the editor and publisher of the *Presbyterian Outlook*. She served Monmouth College as chaplain and later as dean of the chapel until May 2021, and she is the author of *Necessary Risks: Challenges Privileged People Need to Face*.

**Lauren J. McFeaters** serves as a pastor at Nassau Presbyterian Church, in Princeton, New Jersey. She is a fellow of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors, and long ago, she was an actress in New York City, attended the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and is a member of SAG-AFTRA.

**Rev. Alison Messick-Watkins** serves as parish associate for care at Myers Park Presbyterian in Charlotte, North Carolina. When not at church, she can be found tending to her own soul by knitting, taking long walks with her spouse, crafting with recycled items, going to the movies with friends, and taking delight in her children, their spouses, and her grandsons.

# Contributors

**Lori Archer Raible** is the senior pastor of Selwyn Avenue Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. She has long been committed to the equipping and connecting of leaders with the PC(USA), and her most recent theological interest has been focused on gender, congregational leadership and the reformed tradition.

**Matthew A. Rich** is a husband, father of three, author, Drosselmeyer in a local ballet company, and, by the grace of God, the pastor/head of staff of Unity Presbyterian Church in Fort Mill, South Carolina.

**Rev. Amy Hobby Rickard** has served churches and nonprofit human service organizations in her ministry career and uses those skills as an elder caregiver for her parents. She enjoys sharing travel and good food with her spouse and friends.

**Jackson Ringley** is a graduate student at Yale Divinity School and the Director of Digital Ministries for Youth Mission Co. Jackson is passionate about creation care, empowering young people and the importance of storytelling in theology.

**Peg Robarchek** is a ruling elder and member at Caldwell Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, as well as trained in spiritual direction. Her memoir, *Welcome to the Church of I Don't Have a Clue: My irreverent, post-evangelical, sacred life*, is available now on Amazon.

A minister of word and sacrament in the PC(USA), **James Taneti** directs the Syngman Rhee Global Mission Center at Union Presbyterian Seminary and teaches World Christianity.

**Rose Schrott Taylor** is the digital content editor at the *Presbyterian Outlook*. She lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and loves to bake, fuss over her houseplants and spend time with her husband, Christopher, and their dog, Huebert.

**Rev. Dr. Byron Wade** is the general presbyter of the Presbytery of Western North Carolina. A native of Los Angeles, California, he enjoys reading, watching sports, and spending time with his wife, Regina, and son, Andrew.

**Mary Anne Welch** is an honorably (semi) retired minister of word and sacrament. She serves as part-time stated supply for Simpsonville Presbyterian Church in Simpsonville, South Carolina.

**Dayton Wilson** is a devoted father, husband and second-career pastor, and he finds joy in the simple pleasures of sunny days and the tranquility of sitting by the lake. With an infectious love for Carolina beach music, he is known for strolling through life with a laid-back rhythm — and wearing flip-flops.

**The Rev. Jeremy Wilhelmi** serves as the university chaplain at the University of the Ozarks in Clarksville, Arkansas. His ministry seeks to help students become more compassionate and neighborly as they grow in faith.

# Local Pilgrim

## WHAT WILL I DO WITH THIS TIME?

*"You are dust, and to dust you shall return." Genesis 3:19*

"Where are you?" my husband asks through my cellphone.  
 "Sitting in a cemetery," I say. I stopped here on my way to the grocery store to sit among the dead.

Near my city's center, this cemetery has a parking problem. It's surrounded by small, tightly packed, single-family homes, people who can't afford a mountain view in the Shenandoah Valley, people who can't be too picky about their neighbors. My car is parked in a tow-away zone, so I sit in the grass among headstones where I can keep an eye on it.

An ambulance siren wails a few blocks away, but here there is no sign of distress. It's so quiet. So still. Only me and a squirrel, who's giving me the side-eye as he nibbles an acorn. I contemplate the quiet of death. The rest. The feeling of peace that slowly fills me as I allow myself to forget about my parked car, my grocery run, the work left on my to-do list.

I take in the names on the headstones nearby and wonder what advice Abby, Erwin and Paul would share from the other side. I wonder: what would my grandparents want me to know? Or my friend Chrissy, who died by suicide? Here, in the cemetery, I am reminded of my reality: I have one precious, limited life. What will I do with this time? What will you?

*P R A Y E R | Divine Creator, from dust you formed us, gifting us with life. To dust we will return. Hear our prayers for all who come forward to receive the mark of their mortality today, ashes smeared on the foreheads of young and old. Hear our prayers for pastors who touch ashy thumb to warm skin, making the sign of the cross on the foreheads of those they love. Awaken us all, Giver of Life, to the reality of our limits, the fact of our mortality, and the precious chance we have now to live and love and marvel. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## HONORING OUR STORIES

*“So he told them this parable.” (Luke 15:3)*

The St. James Theatre in New York City has an absurd number of stairs. To reach the balcony, one must endure a treacherous hike through the building, crossing canyons of theatergoers, bathroom lines and merchandise stands. The occasional usher, smiling with a playbill in hand, offers a word of support for those ascending to the balcony.

But by the time the show begins, the hike is long forgotten. None of that matters anymore. It is time to tell a story. That is why we are here, after all, and it is why I return to this theater again and again. It holds marvelous stories.

Storytelling is a wonderful thing, and one I find most effective in the theater. New audiences arrive to see each performance, shaping and reshaping how the same story is told and received. Theater is immensely personal; for only a few hours, we inhabit another world. Together. With actors, technicians, musicians, critics and those who just love a show, we partake in telling a story as though it is the first time it has ever been told. It is a beautiful thing to be a part of.

Jesus understands the value of a good story. His ministry is one of narrative and nurture, and he reminds us that the stories we tell – and why we tell them – matter deeply. His ministry is one of the many reasons I am a Christian, for Jesus shows us through parables and speeches that stories have the power to change the world.

My hope this Lenten season is that we can honor the stories of our faith. What might the story of Jesus offer us from day to day? How does his story influence the way we move in the world? What stories around us do we forget to listen to?

**P R A Y E R** | *Holy and wonderful God, we give you thanks for your Son, Jesus, the storyteller, who reminds us how important our stories are. May we learn from Jesus to tell bold stories, ones that just might change the world. Guide us in tuning ourselves to the narratives swirling all around us, that we may hear the stories of all your people. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## STAYING GOLD

*“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” (Philippians 2:4)*

The Golden Pony is a popular bar among locals. It is named after a line from S. E. Hinton’s novel *The Outsiders*. “Stay gold, Ponyboy,” Johnny whispers to his friend who lies dying in a hospital bed, encouraging him not to lose his optimism and innocence in the face of life’s harsh realities.

A waiter approaches our table of four: me, my husband and another couple I’d invited. “You all here for the show?”

The Golden Pony’s lower level is reserved for live music, bands that seem to require a lot of black leather, nose rings and electric guitars. We aren’t here for the show, however. We came for the eclectic menu of drinks: the Corn Hub, Maple Margaritas, the Buck and something called a Fernet, which happened to be tonight’s special.

“You shouldn’t have that,” the waiter says. “It’s a bottom-of-the-barrel kind of drink.”

In light of this rave review, my friend orders one Fernet for us all to try.

A Fernet tastes like Coke mixed with Vicks VapoRub. After just one small sip, I can’t get the taste out of my mouth for the rest of the night.

Our table conversation turns to our lives. All of us are working parents. As we gingerly sip our drinks and dip fried cauliflower into sriracha sauce, we lean into one another’s hopes and fears — for our kids, for our world at war, for our work, which we pray might be meaningful to someone, somewhere. I’m grateful for a conversation that moves beyond small talk, one in which I don’t feel the need to paint my struggles pretty.

We linger, pushing the ticking clock on our babysitters, because we need this — good company, laughter and the encouragement of good friends to “stay gold” in a world of unrelenting, harsh realities.

*PRAYER | God, often life gives us more than we can handle, but you send us companions for our journey, and a beloved community to share the load. Help us help one another shine like stars in a world in need of light and hope. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## REPENTING FOR A MOUNTAIN OF TRASH

*“In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s temple shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised up above the hills.” (Micah 4:1)*

I live in the Shenandoah Valley, nestled between the Blue Ridge and Allegheny mountains. So at first, I didn’t notice anything different about one nearby mountain. Then I saw a green Waste Management truck pull up, stop to be weighed and head off toward the closest mountain — a mountain of trash.

Grown over with grass, the unnatural mountain blends into its surroundings. But the bulldozer working its sides – and the black birds circling – reveal its truth.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, Americans produce 268 million tons of trash annually. Individually we toss 4.5 pounds of trash every day. The global average is 1.6 pounds — we Americans are trashier than most. But we’ve come a long way from the days of throwing waste out our windows to fester in the street.

According to dumpster.com (a fascinating website), the first U.S. landfill was created in 1935 in California. It was your basic hole in the ground, periodically covered with dirt. In 1959, “sanitary landfill” guidelines were introduced, and the Solid Waste Disposal Act was passed in 1965. Today, landfills have evolved into a system meticulously engineered to protect human health, control groundwater contamination and reduce the methane caused by decomposition, a major contributor to climate change.

But even with these advancements, we have a trash problem. Landfills have multiplied, space is quickly filling, and recycling is more important than ever. Green advocates have dubbed us a “throwaway society” because of all our single-use products.

Today’s pilgrimage to the mountain of trash gives me reason to repent of my trashy ways and to work for a more sustainable future.

**PRAYER** | *God, we’ve made our own mountains: trash piled to the heavens like the tower of Babel. Help us consider your creation as we buy and consume. Help us be more mindful of the limited space we inhabit and the earth’s resources we must learn to share. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## FINDING GRACE IN THE WILDERNESS

*“The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.” (Mark 1:12)*

Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. Indeed, a great many biblical figures spent time in vast wastelands. Maybe that is why I am driven and drawn to the desert west of Las Vegas.

With a backpack filled with cashews and a few liters of water, I make my way to Red Rock National Conservation Area. Peaks rise six and seven thousand feet from the ground like a phoenix stretching into the blue sky above, flexing broad brushed swatches of red, white and gray rocks.

The wilderness of Red Rock, the starkness of the desert landscape, the barren, dusty, dry rock crumbling and crackling under each step, the sharp pointed cacti, the eerie quiet — all remind me of the wilderness where Jesus experienced his temptation before he began his public ministry.

I have hiked the trails of Red Rock, traversed the blank rock faces, climbed boulders the size of casinos, lowered myself into crevices large enough to swallow tour buses and ultimately scaled the peaks. This wilderness is where I find peace, comfort and solace.

It is in the wilderness that I am drawn to the One who is the fountain of the living water of which we drink. Indeed, the wilderness is where God fashions streams of grace.

During our Lenten journey, to what wilderness will you be driven, in order to experience exceptional closeness and fellowship with the God of peace?

**P R A Y E R** | *Gracious God, who drives us and leads us to lands that may not appear very fertile, open the eyes of our hearts to discover unexpected, beautiful blooms of grace, love and joy in the wilderness, whereby we may experience a closer relationship with you. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## GIVING THANKS FOR TRASH COLLECTORS

*“Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.” (Matthew 20:8)*

**A**s a Waste Management truck rolled by me at the landfill, I thought of the workers I usually see hanging off the back, pausing at every driveway to pick up our cans and throw our trash into the truck’s compactor. God, I give thanks for these garbage collectors, working a nasty but necessary job. Civil servants, they should be called. These workers make about \$28,000 a year in Virginia.

In 1968, after two Memphis garbage collectors were tragically killed by a malfunctioning truck, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke in support of sanitation workers on strike, calling for better safety standards and a decent wage. In 1981, a garbage strike in New York City led residents to pile mountains of trash around Manhattan. Pedestrians had nowhere to walk, and a growing stink filled the air. The strike was resolved on December 17 that year as an early Christmas gift to the city, providing sanitation workers with increased pay and more sick days.

Can we imagine life without these essential workers? When I consider all I throw in the black bins that I conveniently wheel to the end of my driveway – all the nasty, disgusting funk, the bags that sometimes rip and leak – I give thanks to God for sanitation workers, for their diligence despite their dirty, physically demanding jobs. These workers who keep our cities clean and efficiently running often get overlooked. Thank you, God, for the garbage collector.

**P R A Y E R** | *Eternal God, life moves fast, kids grow quickly and in the blink of an eye we are left only with memories. Help us cherish the joys of the present. Help us observe and attend to all we have in the here and now, so that when this day fades, we can embrace all that comes, instead of grieving all that we’ve let go. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## FINDING REFUGE IN THE FACE OF CHANGE

*“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change.” (Psalm 46:1-2)*

Over my landfill’s cement wall, where people pull up to toss their trash into the dumpster below, I survey what has been discarded: outdated computer towers and screens, broken fans, dusty vacuum cleaners, boxes full of who knows what. I see a red plastic scooter — the kind my son rode as a toddler. Lots of kids had the same scooter. They straddled the seat to push themselves with both feet. A black circular handle attached to the back allows the protective trailing parent to push or steer.

Now 16, my son recently graduated from learner’s permit to driver’s license. This milestone happened while I was away on a work trip. I got home after he was already in bed, and then I slept in the next morning. I awoke to discover my son was already on the road, driving himself to school. I wondered how much I’ll see him now that he is free to drive himself wherever he needs or wants to go.

Here in the landfill, I am reminded how much of life is letting go. Toddlers grow up to be teenagers. Toys are outgrown and tossed. In the face of all this change, I need someone steady with whom I can share my grief and can lament all this unavoidable loss, while still embracing the hope and joy that change brings. Maybe you need this refuge, too? Lent reminds us of our refuge in the wilderness – or the landfill – our steadfast rock of support. God is our refuge in the face of change.

**P R A Y E R** | *Eternal God, life moves fast, kids grow quickly and in the blink of an eye we are left only with memories. Help us cherish the joys of the present. Help us observe and attend to all we have in the here and now, so that when this day fades, we can embrace all that comes, instead of grieving all that we’ve let go. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## BELONGING AT THE POOL

*“Listen and hear my voice; pay attention and hear my speech.” (Isaiah 28:23)*

“I’m not at risk of drowning, but I can’t swim in a straight line.” So I told my swimming instructor at the Jewish community center last spring. Since that first lesson, my skills have grown. I can even (kind of) do a kick turn. But the real gift has been the people I encounter at the JCC in Pittsburgh’s Squirrel Hill neighborhood.

During tonight’s women-only swim hour, I see a mother and her adult daughter with special needs. They are water-walking in a lane, holding hands. Another woman, wearing long sleeves, leggings and a hair wrap, swims a freestyle so exuberant it splashes water at least two lanes away. Next to me, a woman with porcelain, wrinkled skin becomes a swan as she swims the backstroke, her fingers curved with the loose grace of a dancer. At the edge of my lane, by the stairs, two Asian girls huddle giggling, while their caregiver tends to a younger sibling in the shallow pool. Next to the caregiver, a young woman learns to float, her skin so dark it glows.

At the end of my laps, I take off my slightly too-tight goggles and stick my head under the surface. As the cool water soothes the suctioned-cupped skin around my eyes, I smile. This. This pool. This air in my lungs and blood in my veins. This group of odds-and-ends people. Somehow, we belong to one another, baptized into community by the JCC pool.

For a second, I see it so clearly – and then the vision fades, as the things that divide us come into focus: the ways I fail daily to love my neighbor, especially those who think, look and act differently than me. In Lent, we mourn our missteps just as we cling to the holy glimpses God gives us of what is to come.

*P R A Y E R | Creator God, thank you for the air in our lungs and the blood in our veins. Thank you for all the little ways our bodies serve us every day. Help us to see the bodies of our neighbors, strangers and enemies. Help us to see their humanity: their bodies like ours, their God-given breath. Grant us courage to act in love, and forgive us when we fail. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## REMEMBERING TO REST

*“Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with all of you.” (2 Thessalonians 3:16)*

**E**very day I take time out from the world. I come home from traveling through bus rides and class notes, group projects and math assessments, practice sessions and dance and cirque rehearsals, and I dive into my space — my room, my bed and some snuggles with my cat. No matter where I have traveled that day or week, I am safe there and I can just chill out.

In church, they talk about being still and quiet, and this is my place and my time to do that. I slow down. I let out my worries and my hopes. And I can just be.

That’s my pilgrimage: to get back to my soft landing place and just rest.

**P R A Y E R** | *Dear Lord, no matter how busy things get, help us remember to rest. Remind us all that time alone is necessary and that peace and quiet is its own prayer. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## ENJOYING TRUE WELCOME IN THE BURGER SPOT

*“Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” (Matthew 7:7-8)*

**I**n the heart of our Main Street stands a beloved burger spot, an icon since 1938. It clung to its unique traits for a long time: such as no cheese, cash only and getting your food before finding a table. It now takes credit cards and offers cheese as a burger topping, but the distinct menu remains, drawing both locals and visitors. Despite a bustling lunch rush and limited tables, there’s always room.

This spot isn’t just for locals, either. It’s a pilgrimage for burger seekers. Approaching the counter with my usual order, delivered in the restaurant’s unique lingo, triggers a smile from the familiar cashier, an unspoken recognition of me as one of the regulars. But it remains a warm, welcoming spot even when a newcomer is told they don’t sell french fries or don’t have lettuce and tomatoes. It’s a place where strangers become friends, where the unspoken rules create a sense of community. You always run into friends and family from near and far, giving everyone a sense of home.

**P R A Y E R** | *Gracious God, we’re grateful for places in our communities that mirror your inclusivity. May the comfort and simplicity of these places and times remind us of those seeking to belong in your church. Help us share this welcome message with others, and through our interactions with others, teach us to understand that true belonging lies in Christ. Grant us patience as we wait, knowing that seeking leads to finding, that waiting opens promised doors. Guide us to embrace fellowship, spreading the love of Christ. And when we encounter such places, remind us that our ultimate home is in your presence. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## SLOWING DOWN IN GOD'S CREATION

*"Be still, and know that I am God!" (Psalm 46:10)*

**O**n a beautiful Saturday afternoon, lots of people come to the arboretum to walk the paths and enjoy trees native to the Shenandoah Valley. I was lucky to get a parking spot. This arboretum has been at the top of my list of local attractions to explore since we moved here in June 2022, but it took a writing assignment to finally get me here.

I head down a well-maintained gravel path, slowly leaving the city behind. I love the smell of forest — that fragrant mix of air, soil and plant life. The sky is brilliant today, with patches of blue peeking through the tree canopy and enough cottony clouds to protect me from direct rays of sun without darkening the beauty around me. The wind tousling the tree's leaves calms me better than any meditation app ever could. I feel myself letting go of the tension I always hold in my neck and shoulders. It's 65 degrees and sunny, the perfect day for a hike.

The arboretum's path leads me to a solitary wooden bench — lonely along the path. It beckons me to stop and write a bit in the notebook I brought to record what surfaces during this excursion. Fellow hikers pass by, but no one seems to think me odd for sitting and writing. This bench, in this arboretum, seems made for people to stop and contemplate their place, their existence, their God.

**PRAYER** | *Slow us down, God. Help us take in the sights, sounds and smells of this beautiful planet we are privileged to call home. Guide us into the outdoors, down a meandering path without purpose, so we can be reminded of your presence everywhere and of our call to marvel at the beauty you set before us. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## WALKING ON THE MARGINS

*“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” (Luke 6:20)*

**T**he arboretum has a labyrinth! This discovery thrills me. A single sign points the way. The walk is far enough that I begin to doubt I will find it, if it exists at all. When I do find the labyrinth, it’s nestled within a grove of hollies, spruce and eastern white pines.

It’s not the prettiest labyrinth I’ve walked. The circular paths are simply marked with large gray rocks. One whole side is covered with dead leaves. But I trust this labyrinth has a message for me.

The labyrinth’s path begins near its center and then veers to the outside rings before wending its way back to center. As I step intentionally, practicing a walking meditation, I notice anxiety rising as I leave the center, my origin and ultimate destination. For some reason, the outside ring – the edge – of this labyrinth doesn’t feel safe. The farther out I get, the more I am tempted to cheat and cut back to the safe and steady center.

Lots of people live their whole lives on the edge — of poverty, of societal norms, of sanity. I consider the anxiety these people must endure. I also think of Jesus, leading his disciples to the margins of society and to the marginalized who live there. Beyond our call to liberate people from oppression and unjust circumstances, those of us who live our whole lives in the center, safely among the majority, have much to learn from those living on the margins.

Adrienne Maree Brown, the activist author of the 2017 book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, says we should center the voices of the marginalized: “not to be nice, but because those who survive on the margins tend to be the most experientially innovative — practicing survival-based efficiency, doing the most with the least.”

Here, walking the labyrinth, feeling the anxiety of the margin, I recognize the strength and resilience one must need to live on the edge. Those who live out here are survivors. Jesus leads us here for good reason.

*PRAYER | God, our guide, our Lenten journey is labyrinthine, twisting and turning us until we lose track of what we cling to for comfort and we have no choice but to follow you. Hear our prayers for those who live far from the safety we often take for granted. Open us to learning from those on the margins. May we work with Jesus to liberate ourselves and others from all that separates us and keeps us from beloved community. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## LAYING DOWN OUR BURDENS

*“Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you; I will help you; I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.” (Isaiah 41:10)*

**I**n the center of the labyrinth I am walking at the arboretum, I greet a pile of the same large gray stones that line the path here. Cumbersome and rough, the stones make me think of others who have walked this labyrinth and the burdens they carried.

Standing before this altar of rocks, I contemplate what I would add. What burdens do I need to lay down? Shall I add a rock for the fear I carry for my children? For my son to be safe every time he leaves the house as a newly licensed driver? For my daughter to survive all the wild-swinging big feelings of adolescence? Shall I add a rock for the burden of my own self-doubt, for the ways I often feel not-enough as a parent, spouse, pastoral leader?

What rocks would you add? What burdens do you carry?

As I contemplate the pile, and reflect on all the saints that have walked this labyrinth before me, a message floats to the surface of my roiling thoughts: I am not alone. Too often I overlook or undermine the helpers God sends my way, the other pilgrims walking this labyrinth of life and faith. The load I often attempt to carry alone is too heavy for one person. God does not expect me – or you – to carry the load alone.

**PRAYER** | *God our helper, strengthen us for all that we must carry in life, encourage us to lay down what we can, and open us to the helpers you have sent to lighten our load. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## RENEWING COURAGE IN COMMUNITY

*“As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you.”*  
(Philippians 4:9)

Soon I am traveling to Canada. I always stay in Old Quebec City at the Monastery of the Sisters of St. Augustine. Tucked into a small corner of the city, not easy to find, the monastery provides shelter from life's storms. It is a place for rovers and ramblers. It is perfect for a Lenten sojourn.

It is my refuge. I am its wayfarer.

The community's story starts 400 years ago when several sisters, 16 years of age, left the shores of France and sailed to the shores of New France. They learned the language of the Inuit. They created a church in a tent. They opened a clinic for the healing of bodies and a clinic for the healing of minds. They shaped holy friendships. They mended and bandaged and stitched and bound up the broken and infirm. They built a small hospital, free for any person in need.

In French, a hospital, or hôpital, is often called an hôtel-Dieu: house of God.

Whenever I visit the community, I am in need of care. My vocational life focuses on compassion for others. Sometimes I become depleted, diminished, bereft of holy friendships. But when I leave the Sisters of St. Augustine, I am refreshed and renewed. Why? They remind me who I am and who I am called to be. I easily forget. They nurture me in the ways of God's gentleness and mercy. Their sanctuary guides me and prepares me to serve my beloved congregation with renewed courage and vitality.

**P R A Y E R** | *Loving Lord, as Lenten pilgrims, we seek your healing. When we forget ourselves, guide us to holy friendships. When we are depleted, lead us in humility toward your provisions. As we walk toward Calvary, encourage us with daring and boldness. You who are the God of peace, be with us. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## CREATING A WELCOMING WORLD

*“I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.” (Joel 2:28)*

I have often driven by A Dream Come True Playground, curious about the name, but I never stopped – until now. As I park, a young mom leaves with her son. The mom walks with a limp and uses a cane. At the entrance I find a marker that tells the story of this special place, which I learn is an accessible play space for children of all abilities. A group of Girl Scouts volunteering at the local hospital were the first to have this dream, and then the community rallied with support and resources. I marveled for a moment at what my community had built.

A metal arch adorns the entrance, with the words “A Dream Come True Playground” curving across a brilliant blue sky. Tiles decorated with childlike paintings and handprints are affixed to the arch’s pillars, and broken bits of red glass are embedded along the cement at my feet, like a glittery path of fairy dust.

Inside the playground I pause at the wheelchair swing, imagining the smile of a child enjoying that first ecstatic feeling of weightlessness – their feet flying toward the sky – only to be grabbed by gravity and brought back to earth with a rush so fast they feel it in the pit of their stomach. Oh, what a joy for this child, and for the parent who pushes them.

A Dream Come True Playground warms my heart. It is one of my favorite local discoveries. Whenever I need to feel better about the world, about us humans, I’m going to come here, sit on a bench and dream.

**P R A Y E R** | *God of the playful, you inspire us to dream of a world where all are welcome and included. Help us to create spaces, one playground at a time, where this dream can become our reality. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## EXPERIENCING JOY AT A PLAYGROUND

*“He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.’” (Matthew 18:2-3)*

“Popsicles, popsicles. Come and get your popsicles!” The little boy beckoned customers to the playground’s blue imaginary ice cream stand.

Another boy asked, “What flavors do you have?”

“Oh, we’ve got lots. Cherry, orange, grape, watermelon.”

“I’ll take grape,” decided the boy playing the customer. Then the two – now friends – ran to the firefighter’s hose that they could hold together to battle an imaginary fire. After this act of heroism, they moved on to the outdoor xylophone and metal drums, where they could satisfy every urge within their young bodies to make a lot of noise.

I never fully understood the importance of playgrounds until I had children and was constantly looking for ways to entertain them. Neighborhood playgrounds are sanctuaries for children and oases of respite for tired parents – especially if they have comfortable benches. I loved to sit and watch my children explore a new playscape. I marveled at where their imaginations took them and what new friends they met along the way. Children are so much more social than adults. My kids were both shy, but they’d still make friends on the playground, roped into a game of pirate ship or an imaginary popsicle stand, run by a boy who two seconds ago was a stranger.

There is no reason adults can’t join in this creative fun. But as we grow, so do our inhibitions. Yet I believe God wants all God’s children – adults included – to run wild and free and without purpose, to play and share popsicles as if we were already enjoying the kingdom of heaven.

**PRAYER** | *God, when you grace us with time and space to play, let us not be inhibited, but rather run wild and free and without purpose. May we experience the kingdom of heaven like children experience the joy of the playground. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## BEING GRATEFUL AT THE WASTE TREATMENT PLANT

*“Jesus said, ‘Take away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, ‘Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?’” (John 11:39-40)*

The waste treatment plant on the outskirts of town is not a place I frequent. In fact, I only experience it while driving along the highway bordering it. Whether my windows are up or down, I know I’m passing it because the smell is fierce.

Today, however, I pull over and spend a few moments taking in the site — smell and all. I see rectangular pools of water next to buildings that exist for practicality rather than architectural beauty, the whole complex enclosed by a long, tall fence. I giggle at the fence — who would want to break in? Seems unnecessary.

Before long it hits me (not the smell, but that too) that this place requires actual people to come here daily to make sure our wastewater is properly treated. Here people endure the most unpleasant conditions to ensure clean water comes through our pipes at home and work. My sense of gratitude grows, even as the smell bears down on my nostrils. My thoughts are consumed by what the people inside the plant must deal with each day to clean up our waste. I don’t often think about these places, nor the people, yet they are crucial for our daily living. What would life be like without a facility and employees to take care of our waste and at the same time create something clean and new for us to use each day?

So today I’m grateful for those who endure the stench and work to clean up our waste. I’m grateful for the people who work in conditions unbearable to the vast majority of us, so that we may all have the safe, clean necessities of life. I’m also grateful for a Christ who atones, forgives and redeems all the ways we sin by wasting time, souring relationships and discarding opportunities to share grace with our neighbors.

**P R A Y E R** | *God of grace, bless the ones called to step into the sites where that which is foul and repugnant is safely gathered and treated, so that our homes and neighborhoods are clean and pleasant. Instill in us a greater awareness and responsibility of what we leave behind for others, that we may be better stewards of your creation and better neighbors. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## WALKING IN THE SPIRIT AT THE BEACH

*“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling.” (Ephesians 4:4)*

1

White pants flirt with foam,  
her face lifted to the sun-silvered surf, arms raised to the heavens  
to bless the day, a prayer for this sacred moment.

2

Wiry cat of a girl, squealing when the waves gush in to grab  
her ankles. She climbs the sturdy rope of her daddy, anchored in the sand, deep and steady.

3

He, burly, gray tufts on chest, shoulders, back,  
with the square stance of an old soldier, never quite at ease.  
She, slight, sharp bones and bottomless eyes, Vietnam never quite in the past.  
Their common language the way they hold hands and lean into the wind.

4

My bare feet close in on the marks  
they leave behind in the wet sand.  
I am obsessed with the contrast: wider, longer, deeper,  
as if I must judge the worth of every footprint ahead of mine  
until I note how my footprints embrace theirs, sink into them,  
become them.

**PRAYER** | *Loving Creator, fill us all with the deep certainty that we are, indeed, one in the Spirit. Show us how to live that truth. Allow us to heal together as we walk our path toward you.*



# Local Pilgrim

## GREEN-LABEL DAY

*And God is able to give you more than you need, so that you will always have all you need for yourselves and more than enough for every good cause. (2 Corinthians 8)*

**I**n the checkout line at Goodwill, a little boy spilled his bag of gummy bears on the floor in front of me. His parents caught him right before he scooped the candy up to put in his mouth. This was our first visit to our local Goodwill, my teenage daughter having caught the bug to go “thrifting.” The place was busy on Sunday afternoon; and the clerk at the checkout heaved a big sigh before we approached with our treasures.

Sunday is green-label day — every item with a green label is on sale for \$1.00. My daughter found three pairs of jeans, two with green labels. I found two more pairs for full price, \$7.99.

The clerk rang up our total for five pairs of jeans: \$24. “Do you want to round up to make a contribution?” “What will my contribution support?”

“Job training through Goodwill,” the clerk responded, shoving our jeans in plastic grocery bags.

“Sure, let’s round up.”

Goodwill is a 120-year-old international organization, founded by a Methodist minister who collected used household goods and clothing in wealthier areas of the city, then trained and hired people who were poor to mend, repair, and sell the used goods. Goodwill remains a leading nonprofit provider of educational and workforce-related services.

The store impressed me. It was clean, well-organized and well-run. All sorts of people were shopping there this Sunday afternoon: whole families; young, trendy women looking for vintage finds; a mom my age buying an outfit for a party with a “hippie” theme.

As my daughter and I were leaving, a Latinx family was also checking out, each kid with a new, proudly held toy — the girl cradling a stuffed animal, the boy a board game, the parents smiling at their children’s delight.

**P R A Y E R** | *Bestower of blessings, you call us to serve and share. May those of us blessed with more than enough, give in ways that honor the dignity of those who have less. Though our needs differ, your love for us is steady, inclusive and unconditional. We gratefully sing your praise. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## COMMUNING WITH SOULS THROUGH BOOKS

*“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses ... let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” (Hebrews 12:1)*

**W**andering the aisles of my public library feels like the sacred practice of communing with the saints. I love being in the presence of books. Even before I pause to crack one open, I am inspired by these bound collections of words, sentences and stories. For me, books – like the people who write them – have souls. Each holds a purpose beyond itself, an offering to share with whoever takes time to read and receive.

Whenever I need company or the inspiration others might bring, I make my way to the library. Some people prefer the bustle of a coffee shop or the social scene at a bar. But for me, books are the best company, and reading is a spiritual practice. I can sense God’s hand guiding me to the words, knowledge, challenge, laughter or discovery I need as I choose book after book, building a huge stack to check out and carry home. My spoils ultimately lie on the floor around my reading chair in our living room. I never get to them all. But knowing they are there, willing and ready if I need them, is a comfort. Books are the best companions: a great cloud of cheering witnesses in the race of life and faith.

**PRAYER** | *God of grace, you know our need for company, wise guides along this journey of faith. We thank you for the many saints who have gone before us and for the many means by which these saints offer us their wisdom, their encouragement, their inspiration. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## REFLECTING ON GENEROSITY

*“God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.” (2 Corinthians 9:7-8)*

**M**y public library does not charge borrowers for books returned late. It eliminated late fees during the pandemic and decided not to reinstate them. As someone who is perpetually late returning books, I was happy to learn of this generous policy, but also surprised. I asked a librarian why this decision was made. He shrugged. “Why not?”

How many books do they lose, I wondered, when they don’t charge late fees? Is trusting people to return books enough to hold people accountable? I, for one, felt more inspired by my library’s generous loan than by the negative consequence of any late fee.

My library’s generosity leads me to contemplate what our society might be like if we lived and worked and set policies based on the belief that people can be trusted — that books borrowed will be returned, that trust begets more trust, that grace begets more grace, that generosity begets more generosity. What if the rich could make fewer policies and instead trust the poor with generous investments in their communities: more jobs, better schools, playgrounds and after-school programs? What if leaders could trust young people with real responsibility – giving them the keys to the car or the business, electing them as church officers, sending them to vote at General Assembly – instead of dismissing them and their ideas as “inexperienced.”

This Lent, as I enjoy my large stack of borrowed books, I will pray for a world a little more like my public library.

**P R A Y E R** | *Holy God, you bestow blessing upon blessing on us, and you entrust this world and its resources to our care. Help us reflect your generosity to others. Help us give and receive grace. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## WELCOMING THE STRANGER AT THE LIBRARY

*“I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Matthew 25: 35b)*

**K**ristin, a reference librarian, loves her work. She helps people with genealogy research, computer trouble and internet access. She helps people look for employment or print their school homework. She recalls one time when she helped someone free bats trapped in a building, and another time when she was asked for guidance on how to open a Bible. “Is there a proper way?” the caller inquired.

Kristin enjoys helping. “It doesn’t matter whether you’re a millionaire donor to the library or someone who’s come in to get out of the cold, we treat you the same,” she said.

As Kristin and I spoke, a short man dressed in a gray sweatshirt and blue hospital pants wandered up with a question. He smiled wide, revealing a few missing teeth. He needed a haircut and a shave. He presented Kristin with a cracked cellphone. The phone worked, but he wanted help deleting a phone number that had somehow gotten saved to his contacts.

I’ve seen this man before in the library. He’s often here when I am, sitting in the comfy armchairs next to the shelves designated “Fiction.” Sometimes he talks to himself or to the library staff, who all seem to know him. His appearance doesn’t signal “millionaire donor.” But he is given the same service, the same respect, as if he were here to fund a new wing.

In the end, Kristin cannot figure out how to delete the number either, but the man is not bothered. He returns to his comfy armchair to sit and chat and enjoy the hospitality of a public library that welcomes all.

**PRAYER** | *God bless those who welcome the stranger, the lost and lonely, the poor and destitute. God, open our hearts and minds to the strangers in our midst. May we offer each of them the care and respect they deserve. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## FINDING SERENITY ON CAMPUS

*“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.” (Jeremiah 29:11-14)*

I sat at the orange table in front of the hockey rink at New York’s Rochester Institute of Technology. Next to me was parked a campus safety car. Perhaps an officer sat inside, wondering why I had stopped walking on such a chilly day to sit at a table and look up at the new Student Hall for Exploration and Development.

Construction on the SHED was almost complete. At least, we had been told that for months. Yellow tape still blocked the bottom entrance to the building, as it had for countless days.

A cyclist sped between the SHED and I, probably on the way to class. After that, the path was still. Perfect. I stood and walked three paces from the manhole cover on the sidewalk, pointed my phone at the SHED and snapped a photo. I had been doing this every single day I was on campus over the past two years. I wasn’t sure why I started. I was just interested in documenting the construction.

I eventually figured that it would be great to present every “SHED Picture,” as I had taken to calling them, when the SHED opened to the public. The grand opening ceremony came and went, yet construction didn’t stop. So neither did my photos.

Some days, I wonder what keeps me bringing my phone every day to snap a picture of a nearly identical building. For at least a month, most changes have occurred inside the building. Sometimes, I catch a bird overhead. Other times, I capture a rare glimpse of the sun over Rochester. I ultimately decide it’s not worth worrying about. I don’t need to ask myself why I’m doing something, as long as my heart and soul have found worth in doing it.

**P R A Y E R** | *Dear God, thank you for being there to guide our hearts, our souls and our hands through the highs and lows of life. We pray for continued guidance as you lead us toward wisdom, hope and peace everlasting. Let us continue our journeys through your world, as unsure of ourselves as we may be. You are always there to show us the way forward and keep us from going astray. May we find the beauty in this world, in the quiet moments, and acknowledge the kindness of serenity. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## BEING CLEANSED BY GOD'S GRACE

*“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” (Psalm 51:10)*

**T**oday's trip to the laundromat is not part of my Lenten journey. I'm here because my dryer is broken, and the repair will take a week. So here I am in a laundromat advertised as the cleanest in town. It smells like fast food and could use a fresh paint job and a disinfecting mop.

An older woman, her lips wrapped around a toothless smile, kindly beckons me to the dryer where she's just finished a load. “It's still warm,” she says. Another woman in a fluorescent yellow safety vest – crossing guard? construction worker? – helps me figure out how many quarters I need for the washing machine. A third woman is curled up in a chair by the window, dozing in a patch of warm sun. She is so thin and frail that her shoulder blades poke through the back of her shirt like a pair of tiny angel wings.

I wonder if these women come to the laundromat regularly, if we'd get to know one another if we kept meeting here.

This place isn't pretty, and the chair I'm writing in is not comfortable. But the rhythmic sound of the machines is soothing, and I appreciate this laundromat as a place where people can get clean. You roll in with a basket of dirty clothes, and you leave with a transformed pile: clean, warm and neatly folded. In a way, it feels like church. We are welcomed with all our mess, cleansed through the ritual of confession and restored through God's forgiveness – leaving transformed, renewed, like our own life is clean, warm and neatly folded.

As I sit and write among my new laundromat friends, I wish this for us all. May God grace us with his cleansing today.

**P R A Y E R** | *O God who hears our cries, who knows our mess and receives us with love, forgive us our sins, put a new and right spirit within us, create in us clean hearts. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## TRYING NOT TO JUDGE ON THE NATURE TRAIL

*“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6:36)*

Four children clamoring  
 around him, who am I to say what crimes  
 I might commit in his shoes?  
 Leaving the woods, his father-hands clasped  
 loosely around their living souvenir, one of his brood  
 squeals, What if he pees in your hand!  
 By the time it sinks in  
 that they are adopting a tiny frog, a baby,  
 the man and his children have escaped.  
 I hurt with empathy, feel the heart-thump  
 of being trapped amid unfamiliar smells, hemmed  
 by dry, fleshy walls, throat constricted by fear.  
 For the rest of my hike, I can hear it  
 in every creek tributary, how every croak  
 wails after one that is lost.

**PRAYER** | *Loving God, heal this spirit of judgment in me. Remove its burden from me, replacing it with a spirit of love and mercy. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## BEING CHRIST'S BODY AT COSTCO

*“God has so arranged the body ... [that] members may have the same care for one another. If one member [of the body] suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” (1 Corinthians 12: 24-26)*

**M**y husband tells me I need a chaperone for my weekly pilgrimage to Costco. He’s not wrong. I go to buy a six-pack of our family’s favorite mega-sized muffins – two packs for \$9.99! – and come home with a new set of luggage.

Costco is one of my happy places. Yes, I love the deals, but my Costco is also so neighborly. Whole families show up so their kids can skip between sample stations. The employees appear to enjoy their jobs. The checkout line often extends to the back of the store, but people say “excuse me” and “thank you” as we maneuver titanic carts. The line moves fast because Costco is a well-run machine, allowing us to wait patiently, knowing our turn will come soon enough.

Is it strange to say Costco gives me hope? We can develop business models that work and systems that promote good, neighborly behavior. The food court is always packed with people young and old, diverse in race, religion and culture, like the banquet table in the kingdom of God. I’ve never eaten at Costco, but I am always tempted to join the smiling faces eating slices of hot pizza and cups of soft-serve ice cream.

A mom with three young kids is ahead of me today at checkout, apparently preparing for the apocalypse, with a cartful of bottled water; sacks of navel oranges, onions and potatoes; a 24-pack of Greek yogurt; a 30-roll pack of toilet paper. When a bag of potatoes falls and spills across the floor, people around her – me, the Costco staff, our neighbor in line – all gather the escapees. She’s grateful for the help. I’m grateful for neighbors such as these — and for glimpses of who and how we can be with each other, in community, shopping at Costco, living together in this world.

**P R A Y E R** | *God who gathers us together, who inspires us for good deeds, may we be Christ’s helping hands reaching out to each other. May we be Christ’s body building community. May we be Christ’s joy living and working together in harmony. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## SENTIENCE AND LOVE UNFOLDING AROUND US

*“In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being.” (Job 12:10)*

**I**t was a sunny Saturday afternoon when I stepped out the front door of my home for a run and discovered neighbors standing in a circle in the street, peering at the ground.

There lay a juvenile gray squirrel, dying. A trickle of blood ran down from the corner of its open mouth and pooled on the concrete. We deduced that it had fallen from a branch above.

Suddenly, someone gasped, “Look!” Running towards us was an adult gray squirrel. It hurried past our legs to the side of the youth, rolled the body into a ball, clutched it in its mouth and carried it to the bottom of the tree directly across the street from my house.

I took a seat on the front steps to see what would happen next.

Six feet off the ground in the trunk of the tree was a hollow. And for fifteen agonizing minutes the adult squirrel tried to haul the youth up the trunk to the hollow over and over. And over and over it dropped the body, racing after it when it hit the ground to ball it up again.

At the last the defeated adult stood over the lifeless form and, for forty-five minutes, shrieked and shrieked with a piercing cry. When it quieted, it stood silent for a few minutes more. Then balled the body again, heaved it up the great height and disappeared into the hollow.

Dramas of sentience and love are unfolding around us every day that call for our witness and compassion, preservation and respect.

May we be given eyes like God’s to see.

**P R A Y E R** | *Enraptured Creator, open our hearts to the stories of creation that are being written and the privilege of being a part of them. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## BEING A LOCAL PILGRIM AT WALMART

*“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.” (1 Corinthians 13:4-5)*

**A**t 8 a.m., still wearing sweats with coffee dribbled down my front, I’ve ducked into Walmart after dropping off my kids at school. I hope I don’t see anyone I know.

An older woman, her gray hair pulled back in a ponytail, wishes me good morning as she scans my lemons, sweet potatoes and a bar of dark chocolate — you know, the essentials.

“See those five stars on the keypad?” she asks. “You can press one to evaluate whether I’ve done a good job for you. If you press the star on the far right, that’s a positive review.”

“Oh, okay,” I mutter.

She’s perkier than I feel. But her smile is so friendly and warm. She doesn’t make me feel bad or self-conscious about how I look.

I give her five stars.

“Have a great day!” she says after she’s finished bagging my groceries.

“Thanks. You, too.”

A lot of retirees work at this Walmart. I imagine they might rather be on a cruise ship, or perhaps sitting at home with their feet up, watching sparrows at the feeder. Or maybe they enjoy the work: the chance to greet busy people like me at 8 a.m., so they can warm my morning with a smile and gently bag my bar of dark chocolate.

**PRAYER** | *God, you are everywhere, even a Walmart checkout lane. Make us mindful of the ways we interact with each other, and of the difference kindness makes. May your warmth and love for others be extended through our hearts, hands and smiles. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## GLIMPING GOD IN FIREFIGHTERS

*“For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.” (Romans 12:4-6)*

**T**he firefighters were at our front door. Again. In the middle of the night. Again. For the eighth time in four weeks.

My husband is a polio survivor. He overcame the paralysis that left him in metal and leather leg braces as a child to have a mostly normal life of school, marriage and a job . . . until his mid-30s. Then, post-polio muscular atrophy set in. Some muscles had never completely recovered from polio, so other muscles had compensated. As a result, the strong muscles were overworked and became weaker earlier in his life than they should have. Now he has leg muscles that will not support him, often when he is tired but usually without warning.

The crash of him falling jolts me out of a sound sleep. I rush, stumbling to his location. I assure the responder from the medical alert company, and a few minutes later the local 911 dispatcher, that my husband is not bleeding, that nothing is broken, that he just needs a lift assist. A few minutes later, a large fire truck parks in front of our house. From the moment of the fall to the arrival of the firefighters, less than 30 minutes have passed. Still, the time feels like an eternity.

They don't look like angels, these ordinary men and women in work boots, baggy pants with suspenders, and t-shirts with the fire department emblem on the left chest. You know those firefighters you've seen in photos and calendars, all buff and shirtless and gorgeous with their pants slung low on their hips? Well, they don't work at our local fire station. The ones who do work there, however, are an even more welcome sight. Getting my husband up takes two of them, because he is not able to help in any way. They guide him to the bed and make sure he is comfortable. Usually, he is asleep before I can sign the paperwork and see the rescuers out. I also rest easy, knowing that I have seen the Lord at work.

**P R A Y E R** | *Gracious Lord, we never know when or where we will catch a glimpse of you at work in our world. Help us to see you in the ones who are your hands and feet in the world around us and guide us to do the same for others. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## FINDING HOLINESS AT WORK

*“Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart. . . . Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us and prosper for us the work of our hands — O prosper the work of our hands!” (Psalm 90:17)*

**D**o you have a place you go to every day? A place you call work, a building, a room, a business, a school or even a church? Do you have a familiar place where you are expected to be on any given day, where you spend excessive amounts of time with people who are not necessarily “your people”? Is that place sacred?

If you were to stop all the things you do in that place . . .

If you were to shut the door . . .

If you were to stop what you are doing . . .

If you were to look up . . .

If you were to listen to the stillness . . .

Is it sacred?

Look closely. The framed photo, the crayon drawing, the handwritten note, the balanced budget, the window boasting a perfect shade of blue, the emergency piece of dark chocolate. Amid all you’ve done and all you’ve left undone, you see signs of God’s handiwork, don’t you?

If you could remember the day you first walked into this place, would you have understood the implications of your vocation? The decision and mistake making, the privilege of studying, the laborious tasking, the joy of creating, the mundane patterns of producing, the tyranny of inboxing, the efforts of communicating well, the daily provisioning and – most of all – the tender conversing all bear witness to what it means to be held by God. Children and confused teenagers, starry-eyed fiancés and weary divorcees, miscarriages and miracle babies, betrayals and second chances, suicides and diagnoses and tears of grief, sighs too deep for words, and so many unexpected graces — all are undergirded by and bound within the hope and promises of God’s faithfulness.

What you do and how you do matters to God. And yes, by God’s Holy Spirit, the place you call work is sacred.

**P R A Y E R** | *Holy One, You have been our dwelling place from generation to generation. Teach me to count each day as a gift. When my vocation seems overwhelming or mundane, awaken my heart and mind to the sacredness of your presence in my daily living. Satisfy me with Your steadfast love so all I say might reflect your compassion and grace. Prosper the work of my hands so all I do might contribute to your justice and peace on Earth as it is in Heaven. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## OUR NEEDS ARE RARELY CLEAR ON THE SURFACE

*Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Ephesians 4:32*

Late afternoon on a rainy Friday, and the parking lot outside the emergency room is full. I have no idea what or who is inside the automatic doors that, as a sign says, are open to the public. I try to time my entry for a lull and venture inside the hospital, insecure that I am not walking in with a health emergency, but a notebook and pen. I am relieved to find the desk clerk alone.

"I'm a writer," I stumble, "working on a project that includes a hospital. May I sit in your waiting room and observe? I won't disturb anyone." The desk clerk, a young woman, doesn't think it will be a problem but wants to check with security, and she points to a security guard who listens to my request – he's a Virginian, clearly by his accent – and agrees that I am not a problem. Gratefully, I settle into a chair in the corner of the waiting room.

The walls here are painted a color I would describe as "institutional yellow" and the chairs are padded plastic. Ugly, but not uncomfortable.

Some of the "emergencies" are clear. A young man comes in with a bloody gash near his left eyebrow. Another man hops in on one foot, his big toe swollen and bandaged. Others, not so much. A young mom with her toddler and preschooler are tucked into the corner across from me. The mom's voice is patient but tired as she tries to keep the kids entertained ... with pieces of paper ripped into puzzles on the floor (that I pray has recently been mopped) ... at the vending machine where the little girl begs for a bag of chips ... with the automatic hand sanitizer that is fun for only a minute.

I remember mothering two young kids. This two-year-old's stubborn, "No, Mama!" when offered the flavor of chips she doesn't want, reminds me of how hard, and exhausting parenting is — even under the best of circumstances. All three appear more in need of a bath than medical care, but who knows. Our needs are rarely clear on the surface. Maybe this mother just needed to get herself and her kids out of the rain. No matter, I want to pray for them all.

*PRAYER | Nurturing God, we pray for parents doing their best, for parents who are weary but still patient, for mothers and fathers using every ounce of creativity to entertain the curious minds of their children. We pray for people who need help, but whose needs are unclear. We pray for those who wander into emergency rooms on rainy days because the sign says "open to the public" and they have nowhere else to go. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## SICK AND ALONE

*“Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.” (Psalm 25:16)*

**A**n EMT rolled a wheelchair with a large man through the emergency room doors. Clearly, the man wasn't well, his sweatshirt pulled up high around his neck, his hood over his head. The EMT was attentive and caring, asking the man, “What can I get you?” He had a fever, I overheard. His blood pressure was high. After giving these vitals to a nurse, the EMT left for another call. He said goodbye to the man and wished him well.

Besides this man sheltering in his sweatshirt, no one else was in this waiting room alone. A young man with a gash in his forehead jokes with a whole squad of buddies. A young mom does her best to entertain her kids. An older couple sit quietly in front of me, occasionally leaning to whisper something in the other's ear. A man who dropped a bench on his toe hobbles in with his girlfriend.

I was sick and alone once. I'd just moved to a new call, fresh out of seminary, and had caught some sort of virus. I was bad sick — the kind of sick when you start to wonder if you're going to make it. I won't get into the gory details. But the worst part was being alone. I didn't know anyone well enough yet in my new community to call. I didn't have anyone to sit watch, to make sure I was still breathing, drinking fluids, getting the rest my body needed, checking my temperature. I thought about calling for an ambulance that night, but didn't.

Tonight, sitting in this waiting room, I pause to pray for those who are sick and alone. People who have to be wheeled into hospital emergency rooms because they have no one to care for them. Lord, in your mercy, hear my prayers.

**P R A Y E R** | *Merciful God, hear our prayers for those in need of emergency services, EMTs and ambulances. Surround those who are sick and alone with your care and compassion. Thank you for professionals who step in to care for those who are alone, with the respect and dignity all deserve. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## NO ONE IS TURNED AWAY

*All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Acts 2:4-6*

A man carrying a clipboard chats with a young couple in Spanish as he escorts them to the door. The woman holds a baby wrapped in a blanket. I can't make out or understand the conversation, but the couple is clearly relieved and appreciates the man who appears to be the hospital's staff translator.

Later, a family of four, the mother in hijab, arrive through the emergency room doors with their own translator; a slender, dark-haired man who gives the desk nurse all the information she needs, moving back and forth between the two.

I wonder if there is any space in my community more equitable than this hospital waiting room. The diversity of socioeconomic class, race, gender, religion and language spoken does not dictate who gets treated when. Here, the system is based on need. Whoever has need gets help. Whoever's need is more urgent gets help first.

A man who appears to be unhoused walks in (the staff greet him; he's been here before) and wanders over to the vending machines to buy a bag of chips and help himself to a cup of hot coffee. Here, no one is turned away.

**P R A Y E R** | *Gracious God who welcomes all and expects us to do the same, we pray for your Spirit's guidance in this diverse and beautiful world. May we see each other as siblings rather than strangers. May we marvel at the ability you give us to communicate, translate and understand many and various languages. Help us be among the helpers, those who respond to need with care, concern, and compassion. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## LOVING OTHERS AT THE GIVEAWAY

*“They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.” (Psalm 36:8)*

One of the most beautiful things our church does every spring is to gather donations of clothes, shoes and jewelry to share with community. On the first Saturday in March, we open the gym filled with all kinds of clothing and other blessings. Church members not only bring donations but also volunteer, helping people from the community to shop and find what they want. Last spring was my first time as the pastor here, and I saw about 60 volunteers eager to welcome hundreds of friends from the community.

Every day, I am amazed by how generous and loving this congregation is. We treat people with dignity and genuinely care for the community.

In this Lenten season, may we continue finding ways to put our faith into practice. During Lent, we are called to deepen our faith and grow in our understanding of who God is in Jesus Christ. The best way to do that is by sharing from God’s abundant love and letting it flow like a river. Just like we read in Ezekiel, “The water had risen and was deep enough to swim in it” (47:5), and in Revelation, “Then the angel showed the river of the water of life” (22:1), we are called to be part of that vision. With Jesus Christ as our leader, let us be a river of delight flowing from the church, and let us continue being part of the river of love that begins in the heart of God and flows into the community.

**P R A Y E R** | *Loving God, thank you for letting us be part of your river of love. Grant, this Lenten season, that this river may increase and overflow with your grace even more. In the name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior, we pray. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## RECOGNIZING THE PRIVILEGE OF CONVENIENCE

*“Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” (Isaiah 40:3)*

I printed multiple maps of bus routes, downloaded and installed the recommended app with live updates, and I’m still confused. As far as I can tell, to catch the bus to our shopping mall, I have to walk to the nearest stop – two miles from my home. What? How do people figure this out without access to computers or phone apps? How do people navigate this system to get to work on time?

Once I located a nearby bus stop on the app, I drove there (skipping the two-mile walk), parked, climbed over a guardrail and scrambled through a drainage gully separating the parking lot from the sidewalk. Then I followed my GPS north – whoops, south – to find the bus stop highlighted on my app. All the while, I thought of people I’ve seen waiting for buses who use walkers or motorized wheelchairs. How frustrating it must be to lack a smooth sidewalk straight to your destination.

Those of us who don’t rely on public support – transportation, WIC, SNAP, housing assistance – underestimate the time, energy and knowledge needed to navigate such systems. God forbid my car breaks down and Uber declines my card and I have to use public transportation to get somewhere on time. I am not prepared to survive without my conveniences.

Those who navigate public systems of support deserve my respect — and whatever I can do to make their lives a little easier.

*PRAYER | God, we often get so caught up in our own needs and problems that we overlook the suffering of others. As we follow Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, open our eyes to those along the way who could use our empathy and support. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## SHARING KINDNESSES ON THE BUS

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28)*

A bus pulls up and opens its doors. The bus is empty except for two James Madison University students sitting in the back.

“Do you go to Valley Mall?” I ask the driver, a man in sunglasses who covers his stringy gray hair with a baseball cap.

“No. But I can get you about a block away at the clinic across the street.”

“That works.” I climb on board, settle into a seat and look around. The bus is clean and feels new. I relax to enjoy the ride.

I often see people using our city buses, people getting off work, waiting at bus stops at night or early in the morning, in the pouring rain or the freezing snow. When the bus pulls up, how grateful they must be for the chance to sit, rest their feet and enjoy a ride protected from the weather. I think of Rosa Parks, boarding her bus weary from a long day of work. She didn’t stand up to move to the back of the bus when the driver ordered her to do so. She was too tired — tired from being on her feet all day, and tired of racism.

Sooner than expected, my bus pulls up to the mall — not a block away, but right in front of the doors.

“Clearly, I changed my mind,” the bus driver said. I thanked him for the ride and for his kindness in going off-route to deliver me to my destination. I waved goodbye, thinking of all the kindnesses we can share to make a person’s life a little easier and less tiresome.

**PRAYER** | *God be with the weary, with those who must walk or stand on their feet or do hard labor. God, grace us with the comfort and shelter we all need to rest and renew ourselves for the work to which you call us. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## CONNECTING WHILE OUT OF TOWN

*“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:2)*

**W**henever I travel to this one town, I stop and eat at a restaurant I really like. Recently I met a colleague there, and we had lunch before traveling together to another city for a meeting. The server seated us in an enclosed porch, and we began to discuss the particulars of the upcoming encounter.

During the conversation, I noticed an older couple being seated at an adjacent table. The man was sitting with his back toward me, and the woman sat faced in my direction. She seemed warm and inviting. While I continued the conversation with my colleague, I looked in her direction occasionally. Every time her eyes met mine, she had a big smile on her face. I felt like she wanted to join our discussion.

After lunch, my colleague excused himself for a moment and left the table. The woman now sat by herself at the adjacent table, and when our eyes met, she had that warm smile on her face again. She asked, “Excuse me, are you a minister?”

I don’t often talk to people I don’t know. Plus, I was apprehensive about answering. In my experience, the ensuing conversation could go really well — or not. I responded tentatively. “Yes.”

She was happy to hear this. Her husband (who also had excused himself from their table) was also a minister, and they were visiting the area for an event. She went on to say how much they had enjoyed their time and explained they were having lunch before heading their home. I didn’t ask her name or where they lived. But after our short conversation, I felt we had really connected.

I learned that God’s Holy Spirit moves us beyond our apprehensions to connect and share our lives with those we would not ordinarily meet.

**P R A Y E R** | *Ever-present God, we give you thanks for your Holy Spirit, present in and among us. May your Spirit move us beyond seeing others as strangers and move us toward connecting as members of the body of Christ. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## CARING FOR OURSELVES AND OTHERS AT THE GYM

*“We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.” (Ephesians 4:15-16)*

**W**hen I arrive at 5:20 a.m., Mark has already set up weights in the front of the room for the instructor. It is my first time substitute teaching the early class, and I thank him, because those weights are always still in place at my normal 10 a.m. class.

The next evening, Sam sets up a bench and a towel for himself and Susan. He adds workout stations as the class grows. Jennifer runs down the list of who responded to her morning text with their plans to attend. I suddenly understand why attendance has doubled. They are inviting their friends and family members and prompting them to keep coming back.

Kelly smiles when asked about her dad. “He’s finished chemo and doing great!”

Jean finds a sitter each week so she has respite from caregiving responsibilities.

Most people think group fitness classes are about sweat and loud music, an obligation one attends to manage the numbers on the scale. I find community among the weights and pushups. People serve others, welcome strangers, build friendships across political and cultural differences. They celebrate weddings and mourn deaths. They come for the exercise, and they return for the endorphin high and the people who greet them and really listen after asking, “How was your weekend?” I shepherd them through the workout, and we walk with each other through life. It’s ministry in spandex.

Grandma Pat locks eyes with me when I enter the studio after a vacation. “You finally came home,” she declares as she unrolls her mat. I grin and think, “Yes, ma’am, every week.”

**P R A Y E R** | *Holy God, we are grateful for the opportunity to exercise our bodies and care for them. Keep us mindful of how your Holy Spirit draws us together in community and moves us to build up the body of Christ by sharing your love with our neighbors. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## HEARING JOY AT THE DEPARTMENT STORE

*“Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy.” (Psalm 98:8)*

The baby is squalling so loud  
 I don't hear the plunk-plunk-plink  
 on the other side of the secondhand store.  
 Then the baby hushes itself, listens,  
 like that piano is the only sound  
 in the universe.  
 The young mother takes her cranky child  
 out of the shopping buggy, parks it on her hip,  
 heads toward the music. I follow.  
 There she is: a tall girl with bony  
 shoulders and wild-ass hair pounding  
 those yellow keys, one scuffed shoe punching  
 the foot pedal, playing music somebody wrote  
 five hundred years ago for violins,  
 flutes, horns. Music rolls off her fingers  
 like creek water pouring over rocks.  
 First it's me, the baby and the young mother,  
 her forgetting all about diaper rash and me  
 letting go of the past-due rent.  
 Another woman, looking like somebody's  
 history teacher, wanders up and stands

near the old piano. A pudgy man in a uniform  
 with his name on the pocket taps out notes  
 on his khaki thighs.  
 A little girl plays ballerina to the music.  
 An old woman, half smiling, perches on a sofa arm,  
 yellow-white hair floating like it hears the music, too.  
 A teenage boy who should be in school vibrates  
 with music that will not let him stay still.  
 The music winds down and she gives those keys  
 one final shout with her strong fingers and stops dead.  
 When applause breaks out, she jumps  
 like she didn't know she had an audience,  
 she was that lost in the music. One by one,  
 we walk up, say our thanks.  
 She can't even meet our eyes.  
 As the young mother walks away, she says  
 to no one, or to the One who hears everything,  
 I swear I'd let my own baby go hungry  
 and give that girl every dime I owned  
 if it would be enough  
 to buy her that piano.

**PRAYER** | *Mother God, open our eyes, our ears, our hearts, to hear every song of joy that surrounds us today, and tomorrow, and all the days to come.*



# Local Pilgrim

## BEARING ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS

*“Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2)*

The air is bitterly cold as I pull into the parking lot of a nondescript building north of Charlotte. This is where Charlotte sends “the poor” for help.

By the time the doors open, the line is long. It includes quite a few mothers with toddlers, a middle-aged man wearing a veteran’s ball cap, and at least one older lady clinging to her walker. Each hopes for a miracle: a rent payment, a tank of heating oil, help keeping the lights on and heat flowing.

Everyone files in, clutching overdue bills and proofs of income, checking in one by one at a desk marked “Welcome,” where they collect more paperwork.

As I scan the room, I see people with little in common. But every face registers anxious intensity.

I see single people and families; older and younger; White, Black and Latino. I doubt they would spend time together outside of this lobby. They are hardworking people, often holding down multiple jobs, yet struggling to stay in their homes and take care of their families right now. The common denominator is need.

This community bears one another’s burdens. Here, people and organizations come together in the form of bill payments, warm coats and even a big helping of hope for their neighbors. They live into the charge, found in almost every faith, to care for the widow, the orphan and the downtrodden.

Their work is inspiring, and necessary. But why do we push people in need into hidden corners of otherwise gleaming cities, so they can be ministered to by surrogate saints of the nonprofit sector?

**P R A Y E R** | *Father, Mother, God, help us all to see the hidden burdens being carried all around us. Give us strength to remake systems, to break down barriers and to shine a bright light on the ways our community hides our broken pieces, the ways we push people and problems into the shadows and leave to others the task of helping one another. Help us find ways to fulfill the law of Christ, even if it’s not the most convenient place or time and even if we aren’t sure our neighbors will be “grateful enough.” Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## CONSIDERING GOD'S CALL AT THE DMV

*"Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves." (Matthew 21:12)*

"A145 to counter 8. C253 to counter 4."

As the computer-generated voice read each number, a person got up and made their way to the indicated counter.

"B172 to counter 2."

When I must visit the department of motor vehicles, I anticipate being drawn to those waiting. The 16-year-old nervously twirling her hair, wondering if she had mastered parallel parking. The gentleman wearing a car dealership shirt and carrying a folder of title applications for the vehicles buyers purchased yesterday. Everyone anxiously looking at their phones, knowing this trip always takes far longer than anticipated.

Yet on this occasion, my eyes were drawn to those sitting behind the counters. Asking the same questions time and again about paperwork and fees and eye tests. Responding with firmness, not anger, to those who arrive without the necessary information. Customer by customer, doing the job that the state asked of them.

"A146 to Counter 7."

I wonder whether the moneychangers and those who sold animals in the Temple approached their tasks like the employees at the DMV. Attempting to be faithful to the job that was asked of them. Seeking to prevent the idolatry of using Roman coins of commerce on the holy grounds of the Temple. Ensuring that those who had traveled a great distance could sacrifice an unblemished animal for worship. Just doing their job, helping others be faithful.

Then Jesus enters the Temple and starts turning everything upside down. Without the moneychangers and those selling and buying, the sacrificial system would grind to a halt. Of course we know that Jesus himself will be the sacrifice. But what happens to those who make their living doing a job they think is faithful to God's call?

"C254 to Counter 3."

**PRAYER** | *God of grace, may we draw near to Jesus as heaven and earth meet in him. As we put our trust in you alone, let us not forget those who fulfill your call to help us be faithful. Amen.*



**Matt Rich**  
Fort Mill, South Carolina

# Local Pilgrim

## LISTENING AT THE BREAKFAST JOINT

*“Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?” (Proverbs 8:1)*

**I**t’s one of those places of concrete floors, IPAs, vegan breakfast sausage and intentional irreverence. “I’m silently judging your grammar,” reads the sign at the cash register.

“Not as fast as I’ll be judging yours,” I think.

A gent wearing a pageboy cap takes the table beside me. He pops his root beer and opens his book. A news crew sits in the corner, the \$60,000 camera with the fuzzy mic the giveaway.

A little girl with curly brown hair wanders past, and as soon as I wonder where her parents are, there they are. Dad has a bag of chips and some juice. Mom scoops up the little girl, and they take the table on the other side of me.

Curly has two finger puppets (pink pig, green monster), which have all her attention. She looks back and forth at them, seeing nothing else.

Mom unwraps a sandwich for her, and Dad opens a juice. They push these her way. She doesn’t notice. They open the chips. They call her name, again and again.

Curly doesn’t hear — or pretends not to hear. She’s staring at the puppets, wiggling her fingers. Mom moves closer to one puppet. Curly looks past Mom. Dad calls her again. Curly looks at the puppet, but not him.

How many times has God been right in our face – right there – and we’re in la-la land? How many times has God scooped us up and set us before whatever table we need? How many times has God tried to get our attention – come down to our level, even – and we can’t see beyond our own noses?

**P R A Y E R** | *Help us, God, to know your voice, to hear your whispers. Help us to find clarity and to open our hearts to your divine presence and illuminate our paths in your wisdom and love.*



# Local Pilgrim

## LOVING UNCONDITIONALLY

*“But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved.” (Ephesians 2:4-5)*

**M**y hometown’s downtown looks a little like it did when I was a kid.

The basic structure is there. The corner clothing store remains, but the clothes are more avant-garde.

I have a dress cut down to there from this store (nod to Barry Manilow).

The old Belk’s, a three-story deal with polished hardwoods, is now an event center. The old post office — original brass boxes and marble floors still there — is an arts center. The municipal parking lot is now a strollable park with a bandstand and skating rink.

The McCrory’s dime store, where the Friendship Nine sat and refused to move from the lunch counter — it’s partially there. It’s now a restaurant featuring the counter’s red-seated swivel chairs, each man’s name engraved on a plaque.

Farther out, the Greyhound bus station, where a young John Lewis was beaten in 1961, sits, dilapidated, the racist brutality forgotten by most.

The woods where my friend Bryan was murdered are now home to a Presbyterian church.

A special kind of crime develops here. Like the bank robber who got away on a bike.

My mom-in-law said that when her high school played Rock Hill, they knew they were going to have to fight their way to the bus if they won, because in 1950, fighting after a losing game was what we did on the Hill.

This place calls with autumn echoes of a marching band and the crunch of helmet collisions. Known as Football City, USA, it produces more NFL players than any other town in the country. One of those players came back in 2021 and shot and killed six people, including himself. Chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, from all his years playing this dangerous contact sport.

I love this imperfect town. Love this town, because of its beauty, because of its crazy and despite its vomit-inducing horrors. The way God loves me. Nothing can stop that.

Just like God will — and does — for us.

**P R A Y E R** | *Loving creator, we thank you for unconditional love. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## CELEBRATING THE TABLE FEAST

*“Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.” (1 Peter 2:11)*

**T**he communion table travels from place to place, making every site sacred — whether church sanctuary or bedside or prison chapel. I watch in awe as the communion elements are distributed and received.

In the United States, my minister colleagues carry the home communion set to the houses of members who cannot attend the worship service and who wait at home to be served. As a hospital chaplain, I carried the elements in a box and served those who seek the elements, both on Sundays and in the sacred moments of their lives. Food trays became communion tables as the Word was read and the elements were served. I also served in prisons and carried the elements, watching the spaces therein become sacred.

Why does the communion table evoke my awe? The community that nurtured my faith ordinarily celebrated the “table feast” (*balla bojanam*) in a sanctuary once during the Sunday worship service. We longed for this sacred meal and found ourselves helpless when our access to it was restricted. Then I moved from India to the United States of America, where I found home almost two decades ago. In this new home, I often oscillate between the feelings of being home and out of place, simultaneously or alternately. The experiences of dislocation and integration evoke both by attention to and awe at the traveling table.

In both contexts, the table is always local, featuring elements from the immediate surroundings. By and large, the table also is global, symbolically set with one loaf and a common cup, although its names, meanings and practices vary in each context. The table lifts us beyond ourselves whenever we read the Word and pray for the pouring of the Holy Spirit upon the elements. It also moves from place to place, making every site sacred. It calls us to be local and be moving: to love the world as God loves it and yet remain aliens and sojourners in this world.

**P R A Y E R** | *For the world you created as our home, we give you thanks, Creator God! Continue to travel with us we remain part of this world, so we may transform it and remain apart to challenge the worldly. In Jesus' name, Amen!*



# Local Pilgrim

## FINDING PEACE BY PAYING ATTENTION

*“Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer.” (Romans 12:11)*

**H**ow present to our surroundings are we really? I sit in the waiting area while I get the oil changed in my car. Popular music from the '90s plays in the background as customers wait in top-grain leatherette modern sofas and chairs around a white-and-stainless table. The 90" TV is off. I am at peace until the soda machine drops a drink. It startles me every time. Why? I know it is there, but what is obvious still startles me.

Is this a lesson to us in our spiritual lives? Have we become so numb to the world's violence and injustices that when they happen, we are no longer emotionally, physically or spiritually moved? How can we be this way as people of God?

What obvious things shake us this season? Does the ongoing conflict in the Middle East shake us? Does uncontrolled gun violence shake us? Does drug abuse shake us and, more specifically, the reasons behind it? Do hunger and poverty shake us? Do racism and the violence it creates shake us? Do rotten politics shake us? All these things are obvious to us, but have we ceased to be shaken?

In this season, we are called to be shaken in the name of Jesus Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. No one who followed him really expected him to die. He was the Messiah. If the looming threat of persecution actually came to pass, they assumed he'd rescue himself. Still less did they expect him, having died, to rise from the dead on the third day, despite all his teaching and preaching about what was to come.

We can be startled, shaken and even stirred — but we must live into the expectant hope of the resurrection in everything we do, say and we are. This hope is the way of a believer. We must be willing to be startled and yet find peace in the love we have through our Savior's sacrifice.

**P R A Y E R** | *Holy One, thank you for working with us in the obvious times and the not-so-obvious. Let our daily lives be a testament to our faith in your ability to do all things. You are All Wise, and on that we must depend. Lord, please help us understand the importance of finding you in small and great things, lest we be startled and shaken into inaction. We know that you are enormously greater than anything we could imagine. Help us to accept your greatness and be inspired to pay attention, to act. Thank you for another Lent and Easter to remind us of your sacrifice for us. Thank you for your Son, Jesus, in whose name we pray, Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## HERE IS SOMETHING SIGNIFICANT

*“He has inscribed your name and mine on His palms; and our walls are constantly before Him.” Isaiah 49:16*

In the cemetery I’m visiting, the tombstones are as varied as the lives they remember. Traditional granite bricks and round-topped stones, engravings in print and script. Some ornate. Some simple. As I walk between and around them, a few tall obelisks stand out from the crowd. I wondered about these towering headstones, marble and granite pointing to the heavens like the outstretched finger of a winning athlete.

The Washington Monument is, perhaps, the most iconic obelisk known to Americans, its shape dating back to the architectural genius of ancient Egypt. In his book *Washington’s Monument: And the Fascinating History of the Obelisk*, John Steele Gordon writes, “The obelisk, silent as only stone can be, nonetheless seems to say as nothing else can, ‘Here is something significant.’”

When I contemplate a significant life, my mind doesn’t picture the tallest tombstone. Rather, did I love generously? Did I act honestly, and authentically? Did I walk humbly? Did I contribute meaningfully? This cemetery pilgrimage leaves me full of questions.

“Something significant.”

I imagine we’d all like our lives to be so remembered. What does a significant life look like to you? What are its marks? Its characteristics?

This Lent offers us a multitude of opportunities to reflect upon our lives, renew our faith and return to God.

**P R A Y E R** | *God, you are the potter and we are the clay. You mold us from the dust of the earth, shaping our lives for various purposes. As we contemplate our finite lives, our reason for being and our significance, may this pilgrimage through Lent renew us for the road ahead and for the opportunities with which we’ve been blessed to live and love and walk with you. Amen.*



# Local Pilgrim

## HAVING THE EYES TO SEE

*“Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for? ... Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord.’” (John 20:15, 18)*

“I just saw God. She’s dressed in a blue tutu and a Wonder Woman outfit. She’s bouncing around, enjoying herself and everyone here.”

I just texted this to our *Outlook* staff who have been following my “local pilgrim” adventures. Wherever I have gone, I sent a picture of my location with the hashtag #localpilgrim so they could try to guess my whereabouts. I’m grateful to have colleagues to share in the joy of my discoveries: Wonder Woman in a blue tutu, a labyrinth hidden in a forest, the kindness of a public bus driver, a local bar that sparks fun conversation with friends.

Jesy Littlejohn, the *Outlook*’s social media producer, texted back about my Wonder Woman sighting: “This reminds me of JJ Heller’s song ‘I See You’: ‘Every sunset is a stained glass window / Every park bench is a pew / There’s a sanctuary everywhere I go / I see you.’”

On this Easter Sunday, I’m grateful for a God who cannot be defeated by death or contained in a tomb — a God whose glory can be discovered everywhere, if only we have the eyes to see. I’m grateful that we don’t have to wander far on a pilgrimage to renew our faith. My local pilgrim adventures have not only strengthened my relationship with my community but reconnected me with the God I can find even at the city dump.

Unlike children at the playground, we adults often need a prompt or an assignment to send us exploring. I pray you’ll receive this devotion as an invitation to explore your own community and build your own pilgrimage in search of our God, who visits us through strangers, illumines grace and makes every park bench a pew.

**P R A Y E R** | *Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! We give you thanks and praise, Holy God, for joy of this Easter Sunday and the hope you provide. May we have the eyes to see the many ways you are at work in our lives, our communities and our world. Amen.*



