

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?

PRAYER | *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 | *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

LISTENING AT THE BREAKFAST JOINT

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

It'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?

PRAYER | *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)

My 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.

PRAYER | *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)*

The 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.

PRAYER | *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)

How 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.

PRAYER | *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.

PRAYER | 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.*





THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK