

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)

My 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.

PRAYER | *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)

It 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.

PRAYER | *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)

At 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)

The 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.

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

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)

Do 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.

PRAYER | *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)

An 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.

PRAYER | *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.*

