

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.*



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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.*



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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.



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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)

Whenever 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.*



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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)

When 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.*



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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.*

