

Local Pilgrim

WALKING ON THE MARGINS

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

The 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)

In 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.*



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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.*



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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.

P R A Y E R | *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.*

