

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.

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**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.

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**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.

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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.

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**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

## 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 rambles. 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)*

**T**he 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.*



# 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)*

In 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)*

Wandering 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.*

