



## Session FIVE: Christ Beside Us

### 1. Read

Read the chapters "The Pilgrimage of Illness," "The Pilgrimage of the Front Door," and "The Road to Emmaus" (Pages 147 - 182) in *The Road to Emmaus: Pilgrimage as a Way of Life* by Jim Forest.

### 2. Chapter summary

In "The Pilgrimage of Illness," Forest shares his personal experience of illness as he explores the possibility that times of illness may be experienced as a kind of journey. As caregivers, families and faith communities, we accompany one another through these unchosen pilgrimages of suffering. Forest shares that his experience of chronic illness gave him an important awareness of our human dependence on one another and allowed him to say "thank you" from the depth of his heart. It also taught him that hospitals are holy ground where holy work takes place through medical staff, families and visitors.

In "The Pilgrimage of the Front Door," we are invited to consider our call to show hospitality to pilgrims along the way. We may practice our hospitality within our families and be stretched to offer it even to strangers or when it demands a great deal from us.

The last chapter, "The Road to Emmaus," proposes the journey of the disciples in Luke 24:13-35 as the first Christian pilgrimage and concludes that the primary goal of pilgrimage is to meet Christ along the way.

# "Let Your Life Speak"

In Parker Palmer's well-known book, *Let Your Life Speak*,<sup>1</sup> he shares with readers his spiritual journey into depression. Despite an outward life that appeared to have it all—family, friends, a successful career, etc.—Parker found himself facing a serious depression in his mid-forties. He describes this experience as being utterly disconnected from everyone and everything that gave life meaning. His "pilgrimage" towards healing did not move in the direction one typically thinks of when imagining a spiritual journey; it was not one that was directed upwards to ever-increasing realms of spiritual clarity. Instead, Palmer's spiritual pilgrimage is one that brought him inwards to face the realities from which he wished to hide. It was this journey inwards that allowed him to truly encounter himself and God and begin his journey toward healing.

1. Palmer, Parker, *Let Your Life Speak*. (San-Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

## 3. Engage in a pilgrim practice

Engage in one or more pilgrimage practices. Each practice relates to one of the chapters above. Do each of them on a different day or choose one that appeals to you.

### a. **The Pilgrimage of Illness**

Go on a pilgrimage to a hospital, care home or private home. Visit someone who is on a pilgrimage of illness. Or if you don't know someone who is ill right now, go to the hospital, care home or addictions facility and spend some time in prayer for the patients, the health care workers and the visitors.

### b. **The Pilgrimage of the Front Door**

Practising the pilgrimage of the open door means welcoming pilgrims and providing hospitality. Consider inviting someone to your home for dinner or tea or perhaps overnight if that makes sense. Choose someone who is unlikely to repay you, someone who will be blessed by your care. Go out to meet them as they arrive and accompany them out when it is time to leave. In between, welcome them as you would welcome Christ.

**c. The Road to Emmaus**

Cleopas and the other disciple walked from Jerusalem to Emmaus, which is about seven miles. You could consider a seven-mile walk for your final pilgrimage in this book study. That's 11.3 km, about a two-hour walk, and it could be a good way to complete this journey. Alternatively, you could invite someone to go for a walk with you. Don't plan an agenda for your conversation, but open your mind and heart to whatever silence or dialogue flows as you walk with another person.

## 4. Reflect on your experience

Reflect on your experience of pilgrimage and reading together with a group. If you don't join a group, you may want to write in a journal instead.

- a. Share with your group about your experience of pilgrimage this week. Where did you go? How was the journey? What was your experience of the pilgrimage practices?
- b. Share with your group about your experience of reading the chapters assigned for this week. Which ideas, stories, or quotes did you find helpful or inspiring? Were there any sections which you found puzzling, disagreeable or pause-worthy?

## 5. Further reflection

For further discussion or personal reflection:

- a. Forest discovered that the hospital he dreaded visiting was actually holy ground. Have you experienced something similar as a patient or a visitor?
- b. "In a culture that prizes individuality and independence, most of us are reluctant to realize how much we depend on others, though in reality there has never been a day in our lives when this wasn't the case." (Page 150)

How do you feel about depending on others?

- c. The COVID-19 Pandemic seriously impacted the church's ministry of visiting the sick, halting visits altogether, limiting who could visit or requiring PPE that impacted natural interactions. Forest says that "those who visit the sick are pilgrims, for they are meeting not only someone familiar but Christ as well, who is forever hidden in those who are ill. It was he who said, 'I was sick and you visited me.'" (Page 152)

Discuss the ministry of visiting the sick in your community. How have you been impacted by your experience as a visitor or as one being visited?

- d. In the face of grave illness, pain or distress, sometimes all that we can do is pray. Yet, as Forest admits, "Prayer seems so meager a response – in moments of doubt, just another form of nothing. But not to pray is itself a kind of dying." (Page 153)

What do you think he means by that? How do you feel about prayer in the face of such difficult situations?

- e. Share some memories of being welcomed as an honoured guest or providing hospitality to others.
- f. Forest suggests that both marriage and parenthood are acts of hospitality. Have you experienced family life as hospitality? Has this experience equipped you to show hospitality to the stranger?
- g. Providing hospitality and participating in community is rarely an idyllic experience. It may not seem that you have enough to share, that your guests deserve it or that the community is peaceful or joyful. Have you experienced hospitality in such imperfect contexts?
- h. Metropolitan John Zizoulas wrote: "Reconciliation with God is a necessary precondition for reconciliation with any 'other.'" Forest adds that the idea also works in reverse: "Reconciliation with the other is a necessary precondition for reconciliation with God." (Page 176)

Discuss your experience of reconciliation in relation to these two statements.

## 6. Scripture connection

Read Luke 24:13-35.

"What happened on the road to Emmaus, and finally in Emmaus itself, was the first Christian pilgrimage. Every pilgrimage, whether to a local park or to some distant

place at the end of a well-trodden pilgrim road thick with miracles, is in its roots a journey to Emmaus, and every pilgrimage is animated with a similar hope: to meet the risen Christ along the way.” (Page 173)

- a. Cleopas and the other disciple walked with Jesus for a while without recognizing him. Can you recall an interaction with a stranger that you later realized was remarkable or life-changing?
- b. Why do you think the disciples recognized Jesus “in the breaking of the bread”? How does eating together transform relationships?
- c. Forest writes: “Pilgrimage is not getting from point A to point B on the map while counting the miles. The distances covered are incidental. What matters is being on the road to Emmaus – the road of discovering Christ in the ‘other.’” (Page 181-182)

How might this perspective on pilgrimage and on the Christian journey impact your choices in life going forward?

## 7. Prayer

A Prayer for Pilgrims (Page 183):

Lord Jesus, you traveled with the two disciples  
to Emmaus after the resurrection  
and set their hearts on fire with your grace.  
Travel also with me  
and gladden my heart with your presence.  
I know, Lord, that I am a pilgrim on earth,  
seeking citizenship in heaven.  
During my journey surround me with your holy angels  
and keep me safe from seen and unseen dangers.  
Grant that I may carry out my plans  
and fulfill my expectations according to your will.  
Help me to see the beauty of creation  
and to comprehend the wonder of your truth in all things.  
For you are the way, the truth, and the life,  
and to you I give thanks, praise, and glory forever. Amen.

## 8. Song suggestions



"Two Were Bound for Emmaus" by Bob Hurd:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XevKUNwxdsM>