

Dear North Lawn,

Before I give you the thanks you deserve, let me offer an apology. I apologize for taking you for granted all these years. Yes, I enjoyed the yearly Ingathering Picnic out here. But mostly I thought of you as a pleasant walkway for grieving families to get from the church to the Memorial Garden. As important as that is, I now realize you're so much more. I'm sorry it took me ten years and a global pandemic to figure this out.

So let me now say thank you, thank you, a million thank yous, North Lawn. You, this little patch of God's green earth, have been our church home away from home in so many different ways.

Last June you offered a quiet sanctuary a few feet from all the action on Main Street as we participated in the protest against police brutality following the murder of George Floyd. This was our first public event during the pandemic and you, North Lawn, played a key role for some of us.

In July, you helped us open the sanctuary for the first time for our "Pilgrimage to St. Paul's". Having a couple of prayer stations out here allowed us to manage social distancing inside to keep everyone safe.

In August, we installed electrical outlets. Our intrepid Tech Team, who first said we couldn't livestream outside, did it anyway – putting those new outlets to good use.

By September we started gathering here – our first in-person worship in almost six months. We were so glad to see one another, to be the Body of Christ worshipping God together, and you, North Lawn, were our host. We stayed out here with you right into December, watching our congregation go from shirt-sleeves to down jackets. Your changing colors and falling leaves kept us company through it all.

But that's not all you hosted. A fun picnic for Church School families, then weeks of gatherings for children and youth. Our Nursery School met here during the week, culminating in an open-air graduation ceremony. Boy Scout Troop 4 made themselves at home on Wednesday nights. Some of our 12-Step groups considered meeting here but ultimately decided that sitting on Main Street wasn't all that "anonymous".

As we got closer to the winter holidays, we made Advent Wreathes here (easy clean-up!). For the Twelve Days of Christmas you were aglow with strands of light arranged into a lighted labyrinth. Passerbys from Main St., Nursery School families, and parishioners all walked this ground illuminated in prayer at the darkest time of the year which felt all the more so this year.

The only time you let us down was Ash Wednesday – and it wasn't your fault you were covered by a foot or so of snow. We made do that chilly February day having our service with your cousin, the parking lot.

As Lent turned to Easter, and winter turned to spring, we came back home to you, North Lawn, for a Holy Week pilgrimage and the lighting of the Paschal Candle on Easter Eve. Did you hear all the joy and laughter the next day when waves of children came bearing baskets in search of Easter eggs? You've hosted our Easter Egg Hunt for many years, but this year it was a little more special than usual.

And it was during Easter that we were able to rejoin you for Sunday worship. With a sprig grown in your soil, we were asperged – sprinkled with holy water – to remember our baptism. It was here on this humble lawn that we celebrated the mystery of the Eucharist, nourished by the bread if not yet the wine, for the first time in more than a year. O North Lawn, you've not only kept us safe, you've kept us from spiritually starving!

Now comes the time – a long time coming – to say not goodbye but THANK YOU. Now that we no longer take you for granted, now that we have the equipment and skills to “do” church outside, we won't be strangers. As much as we look forward to going inside our majestic building, we also look forward to returning out here to worship with you, North Lawn. Won't it be a joy to choose to come here for worship as an occasional treat and not out of sheer necessity?

So thank you, North Lawn. You have literally been our common ground, our terra firma, when we needed it most. As Job in today's first reading saw God amid the whirlwind, so we've come to see this patch of earth as our refuge in the tumult of the pandemic. As Jesus rose up to calm the storm and the disciples too, so worshiping out here in the elements bids us to turn to Jesus during the perilous storms of our lives.

As we move on from this era, may we cherish the time we've spent here together in God's presence. May we never again take it for granted. May our eyes be opened (as we'll pray in one of my favorite lines from Eucharistic Prayer C) to see God's “hand at work in the world about us” – whether we're inside or out, in-person, online or watching TV.

Among the many things I hope we've learned this year, is that we don't know what the future holds. Pray God that our time here on the North Lawn, sharing the changing of life's seasons, has prepared us to meet whatever comes next.

I thank you, North Lawn, not only for myself, not only for those who've faithfully walked these grounds with me, but those who've joined us through a screen to worship God, to see their church and their friends. From the bottom of my heart, from the depths of my soul: Thank you, North Lawn, thank you.

*Let the people say: **AMEN.***

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