

“Yea, They May Forget, Yet Will I Not Forget Thee”

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When I received the call to give a devotional, I accepted the invitation, got off the phone, and knew immediately what—at least some part of what—I would be speaking about today. Then I second-guessed this first impression and considered a whole variety of intellectually provoking things that I might talk about, and I realized that, whatever interesting ideas I might have, they were not the things the Lord was trying to inspire me to speak about.

Maggie, who just offered the prayer, left me a note from some students who had taken a Freshmen Academy class from me a couple of years ago saying that they wished me well in the devotional, thanking me for the class that they had taken, and making reference to a particular story that I had shared with them while I was their teacher. So, I apologize to them because I’m going to be sharing that same story today. In reading their note, I was already moved to tears. I said to my husband, “This is not a good sign; I’m crying even before I’ve started giving the talk.”

What I want to talk to you about today is memory, and more specifically, the idea of us remembering the Lord and the Lord remembering us. I have been thinking a great deal lately about memory and remembering. I suppose this is in part because of the gradual

deterioration of my own memory as I get older. I sometimes find myself walking from one end of my house to the other (a very short walk, I might add) and finding that I cannot recall why I came to the new location, although I *can* recall that I had some very specific purpose in mind when I started out.

You students, I have no doubt, think about memory every time you have the prospect of an examination looming over you, hoping and praying that you will be able to remember everything you have studied and perhaps even—with very good luck and divine intervention—some things you did not.

On a more serious note (although I recognize you may not be able to imagine anything more serious than your looming tests), memory has become especially important to me as in recent months I have witnessed the quite rapid and serious loss of the powers of recall in someone I love very much and who, I assumed, would always remember me: my mother. A change that began slowly a few years ago has so accelerated in recent months

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that during a trip to see my parents just over a month ago, my own mother, upon first seeing me, did not recognize me. For the first two days of my visit, I needed to remind her repeatedly that I am her daughter. She did eventually recall me more regularly, but all the details of my life—that I am married, that I have children, that I live and work in Utah—remained completely unfamiliar to her. It was one of the most heartbreaking moments of my life when my mother looked at me and did not know me.

In Greek mythology, Mnemosyne was the personification of memory. She was the mother of the Nine Muses. The Muses were the goddesses who inspired literature and the arts. They were considered the sources of the knowledge contained in poetry, myth, and history, which for many centuries was celebrated and disseminated orally. The types of work inspired by the Muses were the artistic, the creative. Memory is therefore the grandmother, so to speak, of almost all creative endeavors and a critical component in the relationship between the creator and the created. This was in part because of the profound orality of the ancient world, where even when something was preserved in writing, the average person did not have access to copies of that writing. The memorization of long passages of poetry, drama, and oratory was the presumed activity of educated artists and citizens. All literature, indeed, arguably all language, knowledge, and skills were preserved and transmitted orally. For the created work to have any value, it must be remembered. If it is not remembered, it cannot exist.

My mother’s lack of recognition cut right to the heart of my identity and my security. If *she* did not know me, who was I?

There are many scriptures and ordinances in the Latter-day Saint corpus that speak of remembering. The verb *remember* is used 15 times in the first 14 verses of Helaman, chapter five, and six times in verse six alone. Verse nine of that chapter is just one example:

O remember, remember, *my sons, the words which king Benjamin spake unto his people; yea, remember that there is no other way nor means whereby man can be saved, only through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ, who shall come; yea, remember that he cometh to redeem the world.* [Helaman 5:9; emphasis added]

The sacrament prayers that we hear repeated every Sunday commit us to “always remember him” (see D&C 20:77, 79). The injunctions to remember the Lord our God, to remember the covenants we have entered into, and to remember and keep God’s commandments are frequent and powerful, but what I want to talk about with you today is not the significance of us remembering the Lord, but the consoling reality of His remembering us.

Now, it may seem obvious that Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ are aware of us, but, as Isaiah notes, His people sometimes believe otherwise: “Zion said, The Lord hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me” (Isaiah 49:14). Whether as a people or as a person, I believe we all have times in life when we feel forsaken and forgotten. But think of what the Lord says in Isaiah immediately after this citation of Zion’s perception:

Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.

Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me. [Isaiah 49:15–16]

He has made us His own in the great atoning sacrifice of the garden and on the cross, and He cannot forget us. You are never forgotten or forsaken; your Father in Heaven and your Savior, Jesus Christ, know and remember you in a very personal and often very direct (and directed) way.

Allow me to share with you an experience I had when I served many years ago as a full-time missionary in Germany. Just after my junior year of college, I prepared to serve a full-time mission. I waited anxiously, as people will for their mission calls, and I had a very strong feeling that I would be called to Germany. And I was. When I found out what mission I had been called to—the Germany Frankfurt Mission—I was immediately concerned to know whether the city of Cologne was in the boundaries of that mission. And, at the time, the city of Cologne was. I had no particular interest in that city. I just had a feeling about it.

I entered the mission field and served for four months in Dusseldorf, a city quite close to Cologne. Then I received a letter from my mission president stating that I was going to be transferred to the city of Cologne. I thought, “This is it, this is what I’ve been waiting for, there’s something there for me to do.” For the next two months, my companion and I worked diligently to find people to teach. Things were going relatively well, but I always had this sense that something critical was missing. We also had some very challenging experiences. So challenging, I think, that I reached a point, as so many missionaries do, when I began to doubt and wonder why I was doing this. It was not only one of the most challenging but also one of the most rewarding and most transforming experiences of my life.

After I had been with my companion for two months, she was transferred, and I received a new companion, who had been my companion during my two months in the Missionary Training Center. She brought with her the news that a mother and a son who lived in the ward she had just been serving in had a son and brother living in Cologne. He was not a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the mother had urged the sister missionary to go by and visit this son and his family. It was actually outside of the area where we typically worked. The

city was divided into regions, with two sets of elders that served there as well. Although it was rather out of our way, my companion had a direct connection to this family, the Maass family. So we decided we would make an effort to go and visit them.

Most of the travel that we did on our mission was on bike, but my companion was recovering from a broken leg, so she actually had a car for a few weeks. The car made this rather lengthy, out-of-the-way trip more viable; so several times we drove over to their home to try and make contact with them. And every time we failed. We tried at various times of day, and we never found them at home. One evening as we were preparing to go to bed, I said to my companion, “We’ve made a genuine effort, but this is taking us out of our area and away from other work that we need to be doing. We haven’t been able to reach them, and she can call her son and say hello if she needs to.” My companion agreed.

The mail came quite early, so we got it before leaving to set about our business the next day. Among the mail that we received was a note from a sister missionary who had been serving in Cologne some months before I arrived there. She outlined in a letter that she had met a woman on a streetcar who was interested in having a copy of the Book of Mormon, that she had completely forgotten about this, and would we please go by and visit this woman.

I don’t know the exact population of the city of Cologne, but those of you who have ever been in an older European city know the massive, tangled, warren of old streets that they tend to be. Cologne is certainly a city of more than a million people. The address of the woman that she wanted us to visit was on a street called Roonstrasse, Roon Street, which is the same street that the family we had been trying to visit lived on. This struck me as quite an extraordinary coincidence, and I thought, “Maybe we should have kept tracting on that

street. We would have met this woman who wanted a copy of the Book of Mormon." We went back to the street and went to this woman's apartment, but she had moved to Israel, and so we were unable to give her a copy of the Book of Mormon. But since we were on the street again—and by now were back to using bikes—we decided to make another attempt to meet the Maass family. Again they were not home. We decided we'd try one more time, which we did the following day, and we did not reach them. I said, "Okay, back to the regular business of our work and our lives. We needn't make that attempt again."

The next day when the mail came, there was a referral card. This was in the mid-1980s when there was still an East and a West Germany. The referral was from missionaries serving in West Berlin. The missionaries had met a gentleman at a street display who had expressed some interest in hearing more about the gospel. They provided his address: his apartment was on Roonstrasse, the same street that we had been to. Cologne is a big, complex city. The chances of three referrals all being on the same street was quite extraordinary.

It so happened that my companion and I were doing a split with the stake missionaries that night. Since my companion had a connection to the family, she said, "Why don't I follow up on this referral and also make one more attempt to meet the Maass family." She and one of the stake missionaries went to the home of the gentleman to whom we had been referred by the missionaries in Berlin. He was not happy to see them. He was not actually interested in having missionaries visit him, and his wife chased them off in a rather hostile fashion. I think it involved a broom.

At any rate, my companion did make one more attempt to meet the Maass family, and this time they were home. When she explained that we had come by several times, they said, "Oh, we're so sorry." As far as I knew, our task was simply to come by and say, "Your mom

says hi," to which I thought, "For heaven's sake, the woman can call him." Clearly, I'm a little obtuse, and I needed some guidance in this regard, so we were continually sent back to this street until we made contact. My companion made an appointment with this family to come back at another time and have us visit them.

So, after these many weeks we finally were prepared to go and visit them. Then when the evening came that we had scheduled to visit with them, I didn't want to go. I mean, I really didn't want to go. There was a ward party going on that really sounded fun—lots of food, chocolate probably. I was sort of hesitant, thinking, "Well, they haven't been there, maybe we could just call and delay." Then I thought, "This is ridiculous! Try to remember why you are a missionary."

We got on the bikes, drove quite some distance to get across town, and went to meet this family. The moment we walked in the door and the husband greeted me, I had an overwhelming sensation such as I'd never experienced before and have not experienced with anyone since—no offense to my husband. It was the feeling that I was encountering someone I already knew very well and was intimately associated with. We shook hands and sat and visited with them for about half an hour. Through the entire visit and immediately after the visit, I felt like I had found that critical missing piece: this family, and particularly the husband, was the reason I had come on my mission and to this city.

The day after we finally made contact with this family, my companion, who had been the connection to this family, was transferred out of the city, and I got a new companion who had been out in the mission field only a few weeks and who didn't speak much German yet. My new companion and I then began, though irregularly, a wonderful experience teaching them. We had a certain plan that we followed when we were meeting with people

and talking to them about the gospel, and things never went according to plan with this family. But in many ways they went far better than we could have imagined. We invited them to church on a number of occasions, but they hadn't come yet. At the end of every appointment, we hoped that at some time Klaus Maass would offer the prayer, but he always called on someone else to pray—my companion or myself or his wife or his son, but he never prayed himself. They finally agreed to come to church, and we gave them close directions. We offered to come and pick them up. They said they would meet us there. They never showed up, which is, as anyone who has served a full-time mission will know, a devastating disappointment. We tried to reach them after the church meeting ended and were unable to do so for the next couple of days.

We were in the habit of always having a standing appointment with them on Tuesday evenings. Tuesday came around, and as it happened, at the advice of our mission president, we switched our preparation day activities so that rather than stay home in the morning and do laundry and write letters, we did missionary work most of the day and laundry and letters in the evening in preparation for leaving the next morning for a conference of all the sister missionaries at the mission home in Frankfurt. So we happened to be home just slightly after dinnertime in the evening, which was rarely the case, and the phone rang. It was Klaus Maass, and he wondered why we had not come to their house. I explained our unusual schedule that week and that we had tried to reach them. He said, "Oh, we thought you were mad at us for not coming to church." I replied that we were very sad not to see them there, but we weren't angry. He explained that there had been a death in his wife's extended family, and they had been out of town.

We spoke briefly about that, and then there was a pause in the conversation and he said to me (my maiden name is Mahoney), "Sister

Mahoney, I know you. Do you know what I mean?" I said, "Yes, I do." He said, "After you left the first time you visited, I turned to my wife and said, 'I know her; how can I know her? She reports that she's never been to Germany before. She's certainly never been here before. I don't actually recognize her, but I have the overwhelming feeling that I know her.'" I assured him, saying, "I do understand. I know you too."

We spoke briefly about the premortal existence and my conviction that he and I very well may have known each other there and made some kind of covenant, commitment, or agreement together that one of us would share the gospel with the other some day. Then he said, "I'm afraid to read the Book of Mormon."

I asked him why. He answered, "Because every time I take it into my hand, it burns like a fire." Then he added, "Can we have a prayer?"

I said, "Yes," expecting that he would ask me to offer it.

But he said, "I would like to pray. This is the first time I've prayed." And he offered a prayer on the phone asking for the courage to do what was right, whatever that may be.

The next morning my companion and I left for the sister missionary conference. There were workshops to choose from, but every sister missionary was asked to attend in either the first or the second hour of these lessons a presentation that was being given by the wife of Elder Derrick Cuthbert, who was in the area presidency at the time. Sister Cuthbert was giving a presentation on teaching by the Spirit. My companion and I attended Sister Cuthbert's presentation during the second hour.

Sister Cuthbert began her talk, introduced her subject, and then stopped. She said, "I would not be a very good advocate of teaching by the Spirit if I did not now heed the promptings of that Spirit and do what it's telling me to do. Instead of what I've prepared, I would like to tell the story of my family's conversion to the gospel."

She then shared with us the story of her family's conversion in England. Specifically, she told about one particular missionary and their experience with him and his teaching them. I can no longer remember any of the details of what Sister Cuthbert said, but one of the things she did say was, "This will not be true for all of you, but for some of you it is the case that you were called to this mission at this time to teach some particular person or family that you had a covenant with, and you must find the person you were called to teach." I felt as if she were speaking directly to me. Then she added, "Elder Cuthbert had a hard time accepting the Book of Mormon." And looking directly at me she said, "I did not even need to read it to know that it was true, because every time that I took it into my hand, it burned like a fire."

Sister Cuthbert cannot have known that what she said was a direct translation of what Klaus had said on the phone the previous evening. She concluded her presentation, and I approached her to thank her. She knew that for whatever other reason she may have been giving the presentation, it was in part for me. We said nothing; we just gripped each other's hands and cried.

The next day my companion and I returned to Cologne. We met several more times with the Maass family and invited them to be baptized. They agreed. At their baptism Klaus spoke, and one of the things he shared was his fear of reading the Book of Mormon and making a commitment. He said that he prayed about this fear, and the answer that he received was a powerful reminder of the Savior's atoning sacrifice and the recognition that if Christ

could, in spite of all, give that for us, then surely he could overcome his fears to follow Him.

The experience I had as a missionary taught me many things. It confirmed in my mind the rightness of the work we were doing, the truthfulness of the gospel. But beyond that, what I knew the moment Sister Cuthbert looked at me and quoted Klaus and what I have known absolutely since is that Heavenly Father knows me personally and will never forget me. He knows you, too.

The creator actively remembers His creation. Closely linked to His remembrance of us is the loving attention associated with it. He not only remembers you; He cares deeply about where you are, what you are doing, who you are becoming, and what you are feeling. He is interested and involved in your life. As Isaiah reminds us, in a comparison as moving and dramatic as that of the mother who may forget her child while the Lord can never forget His own, the Lord says:

For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee.
[Isaiah 54:10]

Extending this mercy and doing all He can to assure our safe return to the Father who knows us and whom we will know when we see Him again is His most important work. I testify to you that *you* are His most important work. That He knows you by name individually and that He will never forget you, I say in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.