

I Will Not Forget You

Isaiah 49:8-16a; Matthew 6:24-34

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“I will *not* forget you,” said my school friend Martha as we reached the end of third grade and I told her my family was moving and I would not be back in the fall.

“I will *not forget* you,” said my boyfriend as he was breaking off our long-term relationship.

“I will *not* forget...” said my father recalling holding his infant daughter for the first time.

“I will *not* forget you,” said God to the despairing Jews living in exile in Babylon.

I am sure that Martha has not *forgotten* me, but we have had no contact since that last day of third grade. That boyfriend hasn’t *forgotten* me, but that does not remove the pain of forsakenness. My father has *not* forgotten the joy when we are together, but he is unable to recall my name. God pledges, “Even these may forget, yet *I* will *not* forget you.” This is the assurance that God is better than third graders, boyfriends, and mothers and fathers at not forgetting.

“I will *not* forget you,” said my friend Martha. Not forgetting is not enough. Not forgetting is not about storing a memory but about building a *relationship*. Not forgetting is about a constancy and a continuity of contact throughout our lives, from which emerges a confidence that we are known, that in this bond we are safe, that our best interests are being sought, that there are available to us resources for negotiating life’s challenges and wisdom for ethical discernment.

When God says, “I will not forget you,” these are words rooted in a trust-worthy relationship that has a past, a present *and* a future. “I will not forget you” is God’s pledge marked upon our brow in baptism. The pledge not to forget is the promise to abide with us, to guide us, to redeem us, to gift our lives with purpose, and to welcome us into the kingdom – in this world and the next.

But relationships are dynamic, and things do change. We disappoint and may be disappointed. In the passage from Isaiah, we hear the anguished cry of God’s chosen people: “The LORD has forsaken me, my *Lord* has forgotten me.” It is a cry that is just as likely to come across our lips and a cry that has certainly come to our ears. O, the shock, the shame, the dislocation, and the enormous pain of being forsaken. The forsaker may not *forget* you but washes his/her hands of you and walks away. To the accusation of forsaking the Israelites God replies, “I will not forget you.” And then God holds up God’s hands, “See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.” Not forgetting is linked to being in God’s hands.

“I will not forget you” is the *assurance* that our fears, our struggles, our pain, and our needs are visible to God and that God responds. In Isaiah we hear: “the LORD has comforted his people and will have compassion on his suffering ones.” And in Matthew: “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these

things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.” “I will not forget you” is God’s invitation to let go of anxiety and to trust God’s steadfast compassion, comfort, and care.

It is also an invitation to examine the work of our own hands. Who are the forgotten and forsaken to whom we reach out with compassion? Who are those anxious and in need for whom we lift our hands in prayer and with whom we join hands to create justice, mercy, and gladness? Who is inscribed on our hands? How are our hands God’s hands in the world?

God says “I will not forget you.” If this pledge is to bring joy, remembering must be different. For God knows not only our cares and needs, but our desires and deeds. And *those* are not always praiseworthy. The prophets speak of the Babylonian Exile as the just consequence—punishment—for the behavior of the “Israelites.” The list is long and the permutations many of the ways the Israelites failed to live as God’s holy people. Adultery, coveting, taking advantage of the poor, swearing to falsehoods—a mountain of sins against God and a multitude of violations and violence against one another. “I will not forget you” is the reminder that God knows our intentions and sees our actions. How can we find peace with someone who knows us so well?

I offer the witness of my father. When he sees me, he does not remember any of the things I have done to be a “good daughter,” none of *my* accomplishments—nor those of my siblings. Gone, too, are the memories of disagreements and disappointments, hurts and grievances. The past hasn’t been forgotten. *I* still remember everything, but because my father does not deal with me on the basis of those past accomplishments and failures, they have lost their power of alienation and condemnation. I can *safely see* what is good, where I have erred and how I can *change*.

There are no benefits to memory loss. Memory loss is not a predictable progression. The part of my father’s journey I relate today is likely to change. I speak of my father because in his *involuntary* loss of the ability to recall someone’s merits and demerits there is an analogy to *God’s* mercy through which we can examine our past honestly and experience the freedom to live in reconciled ways with God and with others.

For our sake, for the sake of our neighbor, and for the sake of the world, God cannot ignore evil, harm, division, oppression, and injustice. God must judge. And we must face judgment. Our hope for peace rests *not* in God *forgetting* what *we* have done, but in God *not forgetting* what *God* is determined to do: transform, bless, and co-mission us to live as God’s holy and reconciling people in the world.

“I will not forget you.” These are typically words of good-bye, words associated with parting. But in Isaiah, God’s pledge not to forget has nothing to do with separation and everything to do with vocation. “Thus says the LORD: In a time of favor I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you; I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages; saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out,’ to those who are in darkness, ‘Show yourselves’ (49:8-9a). God gathers the forgotten and the forsaken and calls us to be *partners* in the work of healing, wholeness, and holiness.

God has wrapped us together as a covenant, woven us together as a fabric, and God empowers us through the mercies of Christ and the gifts of the Spirit to live a life of not forgetting, full of the confidence that God does not forget us.