

All the graduations going on right now make me think of my own. It was the year 2010, a sunny afternoon in May. There I was, sitting in the seminary chapel with my fellow graduates. Looking at these men I couldn't help but reflect on our past three academic years. We had been through so much together. All the countless hours studying; the struggles to absorb every lecture; all the theological debates that spilled out into the parking lot. Then there were life's joys—marriages; births; baptisms. As well as life's challenges—one seminarian losing his young bride to cancer; another grieving the stillbirth of his son. The classes, the joys, and the challenges were what brought us together, making us more than just classmates but brothers. Now, all of that was coming to an end.

Taking my eyes off these fellow brothers and our past, I now looked up and faced my future. Up on that chancel step before me were seated all my professors. There was Dr. Arthur Just who taught me to love the liturgy. And Dr. David Scaer who taught me to pay attention in class—'cuz you just never knew when he'd catch you off guard. He was such a character—one time, out of the clear blue, he just looked at me point blank and said in his gruff old voice, "What's with you?" There was also Prof. Jeff Pulse who taught me how to find Jesus in the Old Testament. And Prof. John Pless who taught me that Luther's Small Catechism isn't just for middle schoolers. Seeing all of them up there, reality was now setting in—after today, they would cease being my teachers, and I would cease being their student. And then what? What *now*?

My profs had shared with me so many pearls of wisdom, taught me so much, but now I was going to be on my own. Where would they be when I'd visit my first dying member? Comfort their family? Preach their funeral? Where would they be when a Confirmation student asks me a question I can't answer? Where would they be when a desperate couple sits across from me, hopeful that my counseling can save their marriage? Where would they be when I needed them most?

This morning the disciples might not know it yet, but they're about to be Jesus' first graduating class. Looking around the table the memories start flooding back. They had also spent three academic years together—learning from Jesus, listening to His words and studying His actions. They too had shared joys—healings and resurrections, hosannas and alleluias. And, of course, shared challenges—learning from their mistakes; competing for the title of greatest in the kingdom; facing-off with the Pharisees. These twelve men had been through the mill and were better for it. But now—they could barely believe their ears—all of that was coming to an end. As the news hits them, their attention suddenly shifts from fellow disciples to their trusted Teacher. Forced to face their future, they start wondering what then? What *now*?

Watching their Rabbi's lips it's confirmed that Jesus is leaving them. He'll soon be gone. He's about to go back to His Father in heaven. And with that, their imaginations run away with them. Where would He be when they run into opposition? Where would He be when they have questions? Where would He be if they ever forgot their instruction? Where would He be when they needed Him most?

Look around you—no seriously, look around you—see the latest graduating class. Maybe you've never thought of yourselves that way, but you—all of you—are disciples. Matthew 28 tells us so—"Make disciples of all nations," says Jesus. "Baptize them" and "teach them" says Jesus. Tell me, you're baptized aren't you? You've been taught, haven't you? Then you—*you!*—are all disciples. But as graduates, you probably also *think* like graduates. Where will Jesus be when we run up against trouble? Where will He be when we have questions? Where will He be when we forget what He's taught us? Where will He be when, well, you-fill-in-the-blank? Where will He be when we need Him most?

We're just afraid we'll forget and won't remember what to do. I felt that way as I graduated seminary. That's why the disciples are afraid to lose Jesus. What if *we* forget? It was only an hour before that he had been in church—confessed his sins, said the creed, knelt at the altar. But, he admitted to me later, already in the last hour since then he had been rude to the waitress, had let road rage get the better of him, and had lost his cool with the kids. Just an hour had gone by since he'd warmed a pew and so quickly he seemed to forget. What if we forget?

In his book *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*, Walker Percy describes a frequent device used in soap operas, movies, and novels. Oftentimes, a primary character will develop amnesia. He or she is in a new place, with a new job, has a new set of friends, sometimes even a new romance. This plot device, Percy says, is endlessly fascinating since it feeds our fantasies about a risk-free forgetting of our old selves and the possibility of a new identity.

Percy then pushes this question of amnesia further. "Imagine," he writes, "a soap opera in which a character awakens every morning with amnesia . . ." Every day, the character is in a strange house with a strange and attractive man or woman. Everything is new and fresh—the view from the window, the lover, the sense of self. "Does this prospect intrigue you?" asks Percy. "If it does, what does this say about your non-amnesiac self?"

Admittedly, we are lured by the prospect of amnesia. Maybe we can describe sin as willful forgetfulness. So often we choose amnesia, don't we? We decide to act against God's will—intentionally not remembering that you and I are disciples of our Lord Jesus. So, again, let me ask you—what if we forget? I mean, not just by accident, but what if we even forget on purpose? What *now*?

Do you remember Jimmy Reed? Reed was an American blues singer, apparently a major influence on Elvis, Eric Clapton, even the Rolling Stones. Well, anyway, legend has it that if you drop your needle into the grooves of one of his old vinyl records and listen very, very closely, you can begin to make out something curious. Sometimes there can be heard, ever so faintly in the background, the soft voice of a woman murmuring in advance the next verse of the song. As the story goes—who knows if it's true or not—Jimmy Reed got so absorbed in the bluesy beat and the throbbing guitar that he'd simply forget the words of his own songs. So, to get some help with the lyrics, the voice of the woman on the recording was none other than his beloved wife. Just imagine her devotedly coaching her husband through the recording session by whispering the lyrics into his ear.

Well, something similar happens for us. While disciples like you and I fret that we'll forget, Jesus reminds us that He's sending us someone to whisper the lyrics. Just listen to the commencement speech He has for His disciples. "I will not leave you as orphans," Jesus says. "In a little while the world won't see me anymore, but you will see me. I will love you and manifest myself to you. Here's how—I'm asking the Father to send you another Helper to be with you forever—the very Spirit of truth—He dwells with you and will be in you." Jesus tells disciples like us that the role of the Holy Spirit is to whisper the Gospel's song into our ears. When Jesus was present, He was the one who was instilling in them the right words, coaching them through the correct verses, directing them in both God's commands and grace alike. But now, as Jesus gets ready to bring the school year to a close, now that the disciples will be on their own without Him, He hands that task over to the Holy Spirit.

See, that's the primary job of the Holy Spirit: to remind Jesus' disciples of His words. He jogs our memories with poetic verses about who we truly are—no matter how we deny it with our forgetful fantasies you and I *are still* His beloved disciples. He prompts us with the rhythmic hymn of faithful obedience—calling us out of our amnesia to sing His commands with our lives again. He puts in our hearts the beautiful song of our Lord's saving grace—when sin's telling us like a broken record that we'll never be any good, we get humming a new tune with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Listen for the Holy Spirit, and you'll hear Him always busy whispering to us.

In fact, listen today—listen very, very carefully—and you will hear that faint voice speaking to you. "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"—LISTEN!—that's the Spirit marking you again for God.

LISTEN!—"In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins . . . —that's the Spirit wrapping God's loving arms around you.

"Our Father who art in heaven"—LISTEN!—that's the Spirit putting the lyrics on *your* lips.

"Take, eat; this is My body" . . . "Take, drink; this is My blood"—that's the Spirit putting Christ at your fingertips—LISTEN!

"The Lord bless you and keep you."—LISTEN!—"The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious unto you."—LISTEN!—"The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace"—LISTEN!—that's the Spirit put on you, going with you, living in you.

Every step in your liturgical journey today, the Spirit whispers.

And as you go home, go to work, go to school, go to Publix or the mechanic or wherever—the Spirit still whispers. It's not just in church on Sunday—although this is where He's loudest—but in Scripture and hymn and prayer you are reminded, refreshed the whole week through. You never have to go without the Spirit's murmuring lead. He's always ready, always waiting to bring you Christ.

She hadn't only suffered amnesia in her soul, but now Alzheimer's was afflicting her mind. I went to see her in the hospital, she being a member of mine. We had known each other for a while, but her confusion and disorientation kept her from remembering much about herself, and even less about me. Then, I took out my Communion kit and set up the elements, and things only seemed to get worse. Seeing the bread and the cup on her bedside table, she looked puzzled and asked, "What is this? Wha-what are you doing?"

But something happened when I started saying the familiar words of the liturgy. The Holy Spirit was irrigating furrows in her memory deeper than any disease, more profound than any confusion. And word-for-word she began to mouth it along with me. In fact, she even started stealing my lines—"The Lord be with you," she said. "Lift up your hearts," she said. "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God," she said. She even went into saying, "It is truly good, right, and salutary that we should at all times and in all places . . ." The whole time she looked to be in reverent meditation. When I offered her the body and blood of her Lord, she eagerly, hungrily, took them from my hands. All at once she finally remembered who she was and whose she was—the gifts of God for the daughter of God. The Spirit was whispering the lyrics in her ear.

So fellow graduates, my brothers and sisters in Christ, should we ever forget as we leave this place, even if we suffer lapses of memory and don't remember God, God remembers us. And by His grace, the Spirit comes again and whispers the lyrics of His saving Gospel to me and to you.