

K A L L I   A B B O T T

## Prayer Pennies

I turned the penny over a couple times in my hand before putting it in the back of my pink-and-gold sneaker. The penny was darkened from age, and I could see the “1972” next to Lincoln’s head. Maybe it had been in the shoe of another ten-year-old girl at some point. I slipped my shoe on, feeling the penny under my heel, sliding around every time I lifted my foot up. I knew I shouldn’t complain, but it was bothersome and distracting. I reminded myself to pray when I felt the penny, but I felt the penny all the time, and I never forgot about it. I thought about it when I stepped off the bus with the rest of the fifth graders. I thought about it throughout science class when we learned about thermometers. I even thought about that devilish one-cent coin while I hung on the monkey bars during recess. By the end of the day, I had convinced myself that the penny was akin to torture, and I would never be able to pray always.

In my Primary class the day before, the penny had seemed so magical. “It’s simple,” my teacher explained, “when you feel the penny in your shoe, just say a little prayer.” She held up the penny like a shining promise. A promise that if I prayed every time the penny bumped against my foot, I might resist

temptation, and “come off conqueror” (D&C 10.5). One piece of copper contained a large enough set of superpowers to become righteous, to win the war against the wicked. But the next day, when the penny became a constant nuisance, I became more frustrated with my lack of spirituality and less determined to be the conqueror. The rubbing against my heel combined with my inability to constantly pray threaded doubts into my heart that told me I might never achieve perfection. The penny sat by my bed with the prayer rock, prayer rug, and other spiritual mementos and reminders I had made at church, adding to a pile of doubt and disappointment that weighed down my confidence.

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“He was just forgiven,” I said to my mission companion, “right away. He kneeled down in the woods one day and it just . . . happened. Can you believe that?” She nodded absentmindedly at my shock. It wasn’t the first time I had marveled over Enos, the young man in the Book of Mormon who received forgiveness after praying in the woods for a day. “Because of thy faith” (Enos 1.8), it said, and I felt a wave of desperation flood through me when I read it. Is my faith enough? I wondered, and read often about forgiveness from sins. I had been serving as a missionary in the Czech Republic and Slovakia for almost eight months; I stopped strangers on the street every day to invite them to “come unto Christ, and be perfected in him” (Moro. 10.32). But perfection seemed so far away, even when other members told me that to be perfect actually means to “be complete,” or that the Lord doesn’t expect perfection from us right away. Perfection, instead, seemed to me something God granted a person as a gift—a reward for faith.

I’d never considered myself perfect. I often felt ashamed of the mistakes I had made. The lip gloss I stole when I was five

still haunted my dreams, and I knew I still couldn't trust myself on the internet. Before I left on my mission, I mustered up all the diligence I had to pray and read the scriptures, but it often seemed rote until I had a real, unsolvable problem. In these moments, I knelt by the side of my bed and cried into my polka-dot duvet until my eyes were swollen and I felt a loving embrace from something—God? Was this the forgiveness Enos spoke of? Or was it God comforting His child who had cried herself into a headache because of her own self-pity? I talked to my bishop when I needed to and checked off the required boxes before I left on my mission, but I still felt unworthy and unprepared. Everyone told me during training that as a missionary, I would wear the name of Jesus Christ on my heart all the time—a visible representation of who I represented and what I was called to do. *I can't be Jesus*, I thought that day as I read Enos. *How am I supposed to be Jesus?*

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Taking off my nametag when I completed my mission revealed a persona that I hadn't yet encountered in myself; I became unsure, indecisive, and increasingly anxious. Maybe the nametag had served as the penny in my shoe for eighteen months, a reminder that I stood as a witness of Jesus Christ, that every minute of my day was one of God's minutes. I would often touch my right shoulder where my nametag had been, telling myself I needed to put it on, and then feel an emptiness in my stomach. My mom reminded me that although it was a physical manifestation for the time I served as a missionary, Jesus Christ's name should be engraved on my heart. *On my heart?* I thought, as I imagined what His signature might look like. Did it hurt when He put it there? Why can't I feel it?

I cried, and I missed the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and I missed the people. I never really stopped crying, I guess, but I

went back to school and distracted myself. I didn't like reminders of the place I loved; I felt I left too early, that I would have been better as a missionary forever. One man, a branch president who had served nearly thirty years in a branch with five members in it, reminded me in a Facebook message that I had begun my "eternal mission." My discomfort with the idea of eternity pushed me away from prayer yet again, and I focused more on reading theory and less on reading my beat-up quad. Sometimes I hated the pages, torn from use, 1 Nephi covered in red lines from eight-year-old me, and the rest of it covered in the messy cursive of an excited sister missionary. The less I read, the more often I felt the need to discard the guilt I was feeling. I wasn't Enos, I reminded myself, and I couldn't just pray this away. I knew God loved me—but because I knew He loved me, I felt disappointed in myself for my blatant avoidance of what I knew to be true.

I was constantly haunted by the words of a young Slovak woman who, after meeting with us a few times, came to the meeting and told me with her eyes wide, "I had to read the Book of Mormon. Every time I tried to put it off, I kept hearing your voice in my head saying *You can read at least one verse!* So every time, I just had to read one verse." Hypocrisy seethed in my veins: 5,569 miles away, a young woman was opening her scriptures to the sound of *my voice* in her head, and I couldn't even bring myself to pull out my own from under my bed. *This wasn't something I can pray away*, I thought. *This is something I can't come back from.*

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Two years into my undergrad, after I had settled into a somewhat reliable routine, I left on my ethnographic field study to Thailand. It seemed beautiful and exotic at first. When I got off the plane, I breathed in the thick air and piled

into the back of the truck with the rest of the students, holding onto the sides so I wouldn't fall out. Five of us ended up in the Hmong village up the mountain—100 Hmong villagers farming lychee and flowers, skeptical of the students who would be joining them. I smiled and used the few Hmong phrases I learned, but every day seemed terribly long—the sun stretching above us, the mosquitos swarming around us, and the spicy food bringing my insides to a boil. I learned quickly to wear a rain jacket in the heat of the day to protect from mosquitos, and in the mornings to stick to rice without the chicken feet.

Lying on my two-inch pad at night, my discomfort transformed into uncontrollable fear. My back itched from the hives my sunburns produced, and I twitched with every sound that echoed off the tile floor. I could feel the bugs almost as acutely as I could hear them, and in this moment, I tried to pray. My eyes stung from my tears, but this time, it wasn't from the comfort I felt years before kneeling at my bed. I felt alone, unprotected, and forgotten. In the mornings I would wake up before the others in the house and take refuge on the tiled front porch, stretching and trying to form the words in my mind into a prayer. Even praying out loud, my sentences trailed off with no conclusion. Was His name still on my heart? Had I somehow erased it? Instead of comfort, doubt held me close, and I searched for some kind of solace, becoming angry. This was my fault, I knew, and I felt broken in all the wrong places.

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In Mark 4, the disciples travel with Jesus on a ship, where, after some time, a violent storm begins to encompass them. I imagine this scene somewhat Disney-esque, perilous, filled with shouts of warning and commands of control. The apostles, shaken by a life-threatening storm, sprayed with saltwater at

every angle, blown about by winds tearing the mast apart at frightening speed, find Jesus sleeping on a pillow. In all the chaos, they yell above the sound of thunder (from waves or from the sky, both equally as threatening), “Master, carest thou not that we perish?” (Mark 4.38). Jesus wakes and rebukes the winds, and “said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm” (Mark 4.39). The sea falls into a gentle caress, the people’s shouts fade, and Jesus turns to His friends and says, “Why are ye so fearful? how is it that ye have no faith?” (Mark 4.40). The disciples are shaken, but saved, and they marvel with fear at what seemed to be impossible.

Once, I thought I would drown in the ocean. On a family vacation in Hawaii, my eighteen-year-old body seemed to fold between waves, and every time I gasped for air, I found another mouthful of saltwater. In a matter of minutes, the blue sky had turned an angry black, and I watched my younger brothers disappear between the rising and falling waves. I cried because I couldn’t help them, and then I cried because I couldn’t help myself, and then I cried out to God because I thought I would die. The next moment I found myself released from the strength of the waves, dragged up on the sand next to my brothers—by my seventeen-year-old brother, who acted like swimming in torrential waters couldn’t have been easier. I felt I had been saved by an angel, my nose still stinging from the water I had swallowed, trembling in a towel. I was saved by my brother, who (somehow) had the strength to do what I couldn’t. When I gave up, I was rescued, and my brother said to me, “How could you have been so scared? Didn’t you trust me?”

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After I graduated, I don’t know that the waves had calmed, but my body floated on the surface, bending with every up and down, my face turned upwards. I often felt like I was in a state

of hypnosis, doing what I should without much emotion. I watched reality TV, ate mac and cheese, and managed to find a job in Salt Lake City. “I’m pretty excited,” I remember saying to friends, “I’ll finally have a fresh start. I can like, recreate myself, you know?” So, I moved an hour away from my friends and family and began working downtown. I hadn’t anticipated the loneliness, the difficulty making friends, and the unparalleled time with myself. I sat in church with a hundred other young adults, waiting for someone to sit next to me, forcing myself to stay another hour but silently watching the clock. My anger had faded, and without distractions, I was forced to confront myself about what was really going on.

I used to go on walks around the neighborhood, my eyes tracing the woodwork on old homes and the blossoms of the trees in spring. I’d take different routes, walking for hours, listening to podcasts and letting myself settle into a sort of calm solitude. I cried less, and began to be acquainted with myself on a deep level. One night, feelings of anger and anxiety returned when I was caught in an argument with a friend over text. My face grew hot, and my heart raced with the dread of the past encroaching on the new peace I had begun to find in myself. My thoughts tackled each other, *You’re doing it again*, and *You’re not strong enough to fight this*. I threw a sweater over my head and walked out the door, my face swollen from tears.

I walked the sidewalks more intently now, my vision blurred, and words spilled out of my mouth in prayer. A prayer of supplication, desperation, and for help. “I thought I was doing so well,” I gasped, “Am I going to be stuck in this cycle forever?” My hands shook and in frustration I cried out, “Are you even there? Do you even care about what’s been happening here?” I breathed in deeply, glancing around at the houses that surrounded me, searching for observers. Catching my breath, I felt calm. I felt calm, and I turned to walk home. Minutes later, I heard someone yelling at me “Hey! Hey you!”

Turning with hesitation and a pink face, I saw two young men in white shirts running towards me. I laughed out loud. “Seriously?” I whispered at the sky. I turned to the missionaries, stifling the incredulous laughter that turned in my belly. When I discovered that one Elder had been in Utah only a few weeks and was a native to the Czech Republic, I knew it wasn’t a coincidence. The missionaries only spoke to me for a moment, but in that moment, God had spoken to me, and shown to me, specifically, that He knew me and He wouldn’t let me drown.

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It wasn’t a single, wave-calming arm that reached me in the end. Before Salt Lake, and before the missionaries, when I felt mental and spiritual paralysis, I only credited myself for my failures. The more I wanted to be perfect, the more I felt completely disabled by doubt. I cried for a long time. Even surrounded by friends, family, and teachers who supported me, my internal storm couldn’t be calmed. But as Joseph Smith said, “Trials will only give us the knowledge necessary to understand the minds of the ancients. For my part, I think I never could have felt as I now do, if I had not suffered the wrongs that I have suffered. All things shall work together for good to them that love God” (*History of the Church*). The more I allowed myself to settle into calm, the more God molded me in a way I hadn’t anticipated.

Opening my scriptures after so much time felt intimidating, but the encounter with the Czech Elder and the prophet’s challenge to read the Book of Mormon nudged me to start to read again. At first, it was a chore. *How bothersome*, I thought, to have to remember to open my scriptures before I went to bed every night. Sometimes my eyes, tired from staring at a screen all day, only stayed open for a few verses. I was reminded of my pile of prayer rocks, and of my prayer penny, but felt differently—because this time, I was choosing to read, not out of

habit or obligation, but out of a need to discover truth and fill my solitude. Prayer followed, and I found that in my stillness, I gratefully examined my weakness and accepted it as essential to my progression.

After almost a year of reading despite my doubts, I sat in the temple and felt satisfied. I felt almost as Lehi did in his dream, partaking of fruit that “filled my soul with exceedingly great joy” (1 Ne. 8.12). I didn’t feel perfect; instead, I felt gratitude for the change that my mistakes had enabled. I don’t pretend to be ignorant of others’ struggles, most of them much more difficult than mine, but I am in awe at the arm that pulled me from the storm. I feel as Enos did, when his sins were forgiven, and he wondered, “Lord, how is it done?” (Enos 1.7). Repentance became not a forgiveness from sin, but an enabling power that allowed me to transform in small ways. Praying always didn’t mean to literally be saying prayers at all hours of the day, but to be progressing (sometimes imperfectly) towards Christ with His help. The gospel of Jesus Christ became Jesus Christ’s gospel; I once thought I needed to be qualified to inherit His promises, but I came to understand that each of us is already qualified. I threw out my checklist. I didn’t need to be qualified. It’s okay to be fearful in the midst of a storm.

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I found a wart on the bottom of my left heel a few years ago. I tried to remove it myself, but just distorted it more. I keep meaning to get it removed, but I can’t help but feel that it belongs there. It doesn’t bother me like it used to, and I don’t think about it often. It’s a memory of the past, a scar that lets me remember the penny in my shoe as a ten-year-old, the cobblestone streets I walked on my mission, and the dirt roads I walked in the lychee fields of Thailand. I’m reminded of Jesus

Christ's scars, in His wrists, feet, and sides, and of His invitation to "Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world" (3 Ne. 11.14). His scars bear witness of His sacrifice for us, just as my scars bear witness of my pains that He has healed.

#### Works Cited

*History of the Church*, 3:286; from a letter from Joseph Smith to Presendia Huntington Buell, Mar. 15, 1839, Liberty Jail, Liberty, Missouri; Sister Buell's last name is incorrectly spelled "Bull" in *History of the Church*.