



Let God Deal With Alexander

TEXT
2 Timothy 4:6–15

May 29, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I got a call in the middle of the night. I was the hospital chaplain. Well, not a full chaplain; it was an internship while I was in seminary. I had not spent much time in hospitals or the circumstances you find there. But I was the chaplain on call, so I went to the sixth floor.

There I met a young woman, not much older than I was at the time. She had just lost her child. He couldn't have been more than 3 years old, and now she sat beside him, tears running down her face.

I introduced myself, told her I was the chaplain, and I prayed for her. Then we talked. Well, that's not really the case; the truth is, I talked. I was uncomfortable with the situation and uncomfortable with the silence — so I talked. I talked until this broken-hearted mother looked up at me and asked very gently, "Would you mind if we didn't talk?"

It was a terrible situation. I desperately wanted to help. But I wasn't helping.

I have learned some things since then. I still have more to learn, no doubt. Here's something I have learned. Sometimes when the pain is too intense, it is better just to sit in silence. There

is a time for words, but there are also times for silence.

But I have also learned something else. Sometimes, when things go wrong, we need to try to help. Sometimes, when people are injured or hurting, we need to do what we can to make things right. That's what faith calls us to do. But other times, the only faithful option is to just let God fix that which we cannot fix.

Paul writes from prison. I say Paul, but most scholars doubt that Paul wrote this entire letter. As a whole, 2 Timothy was most likely written by a student of Paul, a generation later. But there are other portions of this letter that are so intimate, so personal, that it is hard to imagine them to be anything other than scraps of correspondence from Paul to his son-in-the-faith, Timothy.

Such is the case in the text this morning. In these words, we hear Paul pleading with Timothy: *Come to me. The strong apostle is pleading with his son, I don't have long now, and I need to see you one last time. So, Timothy, come before winter.*

We will focus on that verse next Sunday, as I have appropriately titled my sermon for the first Sunday of June "Come Before Winter."

But today we reflect on Alexander. Paul says, *Demas has deserted me; Crescens and Titus are both gone; Tychicus has gone to Ephesus.* Some of Paul's friends are sent as missionaries, but some have abandoned him — perhaps embarrassed, or even afraid of the fact that he is in prison.

And then there is Alexander. He says, "Alexander the copper-smith did me great harm; the Lord will pay him back for his deeds."

I don't know about you, but I wouldn't want to be Alexander! God will pay him back for his deeds. Ouch!

I went to school in Atlanta, and there were no middle schools. Elementary school went through seventh grade, and high school started in eighth grade. Eighth-graders were called "subfreshmen." I'm not making that up. Having eighth-graders and 12th-graders in the same school is not a great idea.

My friend Stuart lived down the street, and Stuart was an eighth-grade kid, but still lived in an elementary school body. One day he missed all his classes after lunch because some upperclassmen thought it would be funny to lock Stuart in his own locker. He fit in there just fine.

Stuart made friends with Taylor. I remember the day we were at lunch, and some older kid was pestering Stuart, taking his lunch. Then Taylor walked up to the table. I forgot to mention that Taylor was a senior and was on the wrestling team. Taylor leaned down face to face with the bully and asked, “You aren’t messing with my friend Stuart, are you?”

“No, no, no!” the kid said. “We are all cool here. Here, Stuart, have some of my lunch.” Stuart just smiled.

You have probably lived that moment — that “reversal” moment, when the power shifts, when the one throwing power around loses his power, when the one on the top is no longer on the top.

It sounds like Paul trusts that God will say, *Hey, Alexander, you aren’t messing with my friend Paul, are you?*

“Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will pay him back for his deeds.”

We don’t have any details about how Alexander caused great harm. Maybe Alexander is the reason Paul is in prison. Maybe Alexander has said things about Paul that were not true. Maybe Alexander had caused harm to the church, which would have pained the apostle even more. We don’t know. We just know Paul was injured. And he writes to Timothy because Paul knows Timothy would be concerned about that. We don’t like it when our friends are injured.

If I understand the text, Paul is telling Timothy, *God will*

pay him back for his deeds, so Timothy, you leave him alone. Don’t try to fix this. Don’t try to set this right. Let God deal with Alexander.

When wrong has been done, particularly to someone we love, we want to make things right. When injustice occurs, we want to set things right. But sometimes doing so just makes things worse. There are some wrongs we can’t make right. We have to leave them to God.

I read Candice Millard’s book *Destiny of the Republic*.¹ It is the story of the assassination of President James Garfield.

In 1880, there were three men running for the Republican nomination for president: Ulysses S. Grant, James Blaine and John Sherman. But the convention could not settle on any of these. Finally, on the 36th ballot, they elected a man who had not run and said he did not wish to be the nominee: James A. Garfield. He was only at the convention to give the nominating speech for Sherman. He then went on to be elected the 20th president of the United States. Four months into his presidency, he was shot. The bullet entered his back.

It was not a fatal wound. But it was a wound from which he never recovered. What killed President Garfield was not the bullet in his body, but his doctor.

In 1876, just five years earlier, there had been a Centennial Fair, a celebration of the nation’s first 100 years. Advances of technology and science were on display. It was at this fair that Alexander Graham Bell intro-

duced the telephone to America. At that same fair was a doctor from Europe named Joseph Lister. He shared a practice of antisepsis — using carbolic acid to kill germs. He said when used in surgery, the cases of infection are dramatically reduced and patient survival rates increase.

While embraced in Europe, Lister’s teaching was largely ignored in American medical practice. Several months after the shooting, Garfield died, and his autopsy revealed that he was killed by his infection. His doctor, Dr. Willard Bliss, had met Lister, but found his teaching irrelevant. Bliss, unable to locate the bullet, kept probing the wound with his unwashed fingers and instruments on an almost daily basis, each time introducing the bacteria that would eventually kill the president. He was attempting to help, but rather than help, he made things worse.

We can do that to each other sometimes. When wrong occurs, we need wisdom. Sometimes the most faithful thing to do is to do everything we can to make things right. That is particularly true when we injure someone else.

But sometimes wisdom requires that we let things go; that we trust God to make right that which we cannot make right. I think that is what Paul is telling Timothy. *You leave Alexander to God, Timothy. I don’t want you to make things worse. Let God make right that which we cannot make right.*

Carol and I had not been married long. We were still

learning each other's families. I was the eldest of four in my family, and Carol was the youngest of four in her family. I noticed that at times they didn't fully respect her. They treated her like the baby, even though she was an adult.

So I decided I would fix that. I waded into 25 years of a family system; I spoke the truth; I stood up for my bride. I told them how they needed to treat her differently. I don't need to tell you how this worked out.

I thought Carol would be so grateful to me for standing up for her. And her reaction was strong, but gratitude was way down the list. I was right; they did treat her like the baby on occasion. But that wasn't something I could fix.

Paul was hurt by Alexander, and Paul knows Timothy might try to set things right. So Paul says, *Timothy, this is not yours to fix. Leave Alexander to God.*

Miroslav Volf teaches theology at Yale. He grew up in the former Yugoslavia and was required to serve in the Soviet Army. As a Christian married to an American, he was viewed with suspicion. So he was interrogated as a National Security Threat. His interrogator was one he calls Captain G. Of that experience, he writes:

"My interrogations might be categorized as a mid-level form of abuse — greater than an insult or a blow, but mild compared to the torture and suffering many others have undergone at the hands of tormentors. ... Yet afterward, my

mind was enslaved by the abuse I had suffered. It was as though Captain G. had moved into the very household of my mind, ensconced himself right in the middle of its living room, and I had to live with him."²

That experience launched Volf on a journey to understand how a person of faith responds to such injury. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Volf has returned looking for Captain G. — to confront him, to judge him, to endeavor to forgive him. Volf spoke in Kansas City several years ago, and I heard him say, "The only way I can forgive Captain G. is to trust that God will make right in him and in me the things that I cannot make right."

There are so many wrongs in this world. We need to repair what we can. It is worth our all.

But we also need wisdom that is born of hope. Some things we need to just leave with God and trust that God will make right in us and in our world that which we can't repair.

When it's wrong, and you can't fix it, trust that in time, God in God's mercy and grace and truth will make right everything that has gone wrong.

¹Candice Millard, *Destiny of the Republic: A Tale of Madness, Medicine and the Murder of a President* (2011)

²Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (2006), p. 6

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.