



Let It Go

SCRIPTURE:
Acts 15: 36-40
2 Timothy 4:9-11

May 16, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

If we were reading the Bible from front to back, when we reach this passage from Paul, we would have been caught by surprise. Here Paul, believing that he is in his last days, wants to see his friends one last time. That's not surprising. What surprises us is that he wants to see Mark. *Get Mark, he is useful to me.*

The last time we heard about Mark and Paul, they were colleagues, they shared in the gospel, they were friends. But something happened. We don't know the details. Mark was traveling with Paul on a missionary journey and for reasons that are not mentioned in the text, Mark left Paul and returned to Jerusalem. Later, Paul and Barnabas wanted to go on a missionary journey and Barnabas wanted to take Mark with them, but Paul said no. Mark was unreliable. Mark had abandoned them and let Paul down. Paul refused to take Mark along.

This moment reads like one of the early splits in the church. It was painful, no doubt. But now, Paul says, bring Mark for he is useful in my ministry.

I don't know how it happened, but somewhere, off stage, Paul and Mark reconciled. Whatever the problem was that kept them apart, they put it behind them. Paul forgave Mark, or maybe it was Mark who forgave Paul. But somehow, they held on to their friendship. And in a beautiful moment, when Paul is most in need, it is Mark he thinks of. *Get Mark, he writes.*

Sometimes, friendship requires forgiveness... because none of us has it all together all the time. When we get to know people, when we befriend people, we will discover that they may let us down. They may disappoint us. Worse than that, they may hurt us deeply. For friendships to last and sometimes for friendships to grow, we will have to learn

something about forgiveness.

And it's hard. Jesus' act of forgiveness involved crucifixion. Forgiveness is something of a crucifixion experience. Forgiveness is not something we do because something happened, but it's all okay now. No, forgiveness is what we do when it's not okay and it can't be fixed, and we choose to hold on to the friendship anyway.

I have told you before of a time I learned this truth. I visited Jean; she was a saint in my congregation in Florida. She loved flowers and led one of the women's study groups. And she loved her husband. They were married for 53 years before cancer took him. I suppose it was six or eight months after his death, I stopped by for a cup of coffee. We sat in the kitchen and drank coffee and talked about George. She said, "Tom, after all these years of marriage, I can barely remember life without him. Nothing feels right. I miss him every day." I said, "Jean, he sure loved you." "He did, didn't he?"

What surprised me is that she sounded a bit surprised. I said, "Well, of course he did. I mean you were together for 53 years." She said, "Tom, over all those years I gave him more than a few reasons not to love me, but he did." I imagine she was right. There is no relationship that escapes the need for forgiveness.

I don't know why it was that Mark decided to leave Paul on that missionary trip. Maybe they had a disagreement. Maybe Mark wasn't as committed as Paul wanted him to be. I don't know. But it hurt them both and for a while Paul was not willing to be with Mark.

I don't know how that changed. Maybe Paul realized he didn't want to die without making things right with Mark. I don't know. But I know in these

verses we hear reconciliation. Bring Mark, he is good for my ministry. Bring Mark, he's good for me.

The thinker that has taught me the most about forgiveness is Dr. Miroslav Volf. Volf teaches at Yale Divinity School, but he grew up in Croatia, when it was still Yugoslavia. For a variety of reasons, but for no real cause, he was viewed as a national security threat. When people are afraid, it is not hard to be a national security threat. He was interrogated by an officer he calls Captain G. 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, especially those schooled in Red Army methods... Yet, even 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.”¹

What Volf has taught me is this. Volf says forgiveness is tied to memory. Some say, if you have been injured, be sure you never forget, to ensure it never happens again. But Volf has a different offering.

He states, “we must remember rightly.” And what he means by that, if we are going to stay in relationship, there are some hurts, some disappointments, some injuries we are going to have to simply let go. We have to forget them. It's what he calls remembering rightly.

Maybe that's the lesson in our incomplete story. We aren't told all the details of what drove Paul and Mark from one another. We aren't told what the real problem was—maybe because they have chosen not to remember it.

I have a friend who is a pastor now. I have told

you of him before. I hope you don't mind when I sometimes tell you the same things again and again. Important things need to be heard more than once. My friend grew up with a mother who faced her own demons. She was, on the one hand, gracious and charismatic. But because of the mysteries of brain chemistry, she could also be harsh, even violent. He remembers often being slapped across his face for no discernable reason.

As life has it, children sometimes end up parenting their parents. Because of the mysteries of the brain, she journeyed into dementia. My friend, in the last seasons of his mother's life, was visiting her at a retirement home. She asked, “Son, did I ever strike you?”

Yes... yes, you were brutal. You have left me with pain that I have yet to shake. Your anger stalks me in my dreams.

That is what he could have said. But instead, he said, “Mother, I have no memory of that.”

It may be impossible to forget the injuries of days gone by, but it is possible, by the grace of God, to remember rightly. To remember rightly will require, in part, remembering forward a bit. Remember what God has done in Jesus Christ and how he has freed us all to be defined less by who we have been to one another, and more by who he has been to us. Maybe there is a past you need to remember rightly. Maybe there is an injury from which you need to be freed.

When it is something we can make right, then we must do everything we can to make it right. But when it can't be fixed, then wisdom calls us to let it go. In the name of the God who promises to remember our sin no more, for the sake of friendship... let it go.

1 Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (2006) p. 6-7.