



The Heart Has a History

TEXT
John 4:1–26

February 25, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

The series is “When Things Have Gone Wrong.” It’s simple enough; when things have gone wrong, as people of faith, we do everything we can to make them right. But what if they can’t be made right?

Jesus talks to a Samaritan woman. There are a host of reasons this conversation should not be happening. He is a man; she is a woman. In that day it was rare, even inappropriate, for men to speak to women in public. In addition, he was Jewish; she was Samaritan. If you know nothing more than the parable of the Good Samaritan, you know that Jews and Samaritans did not care for one another.

And yet, if a Jew and a Samaritan were going to have a conversation, there is one question everyone knows would be raised: Where do we worship? She says, “Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you insist that it is necessary to worship in Jerusalem.” It seems to be a question of geography. Where is the best place to pray?

We know that God is not tied to place. What do we do with this story?

John editorializes, “Jews do not share things with Samaritans.” That is both right and absolutely

wrong. They didn’t share meals. They didn’t share conversation. They didn’t share prayers. But they did share history.

When this Samaritan woman mentions the sanctuary on Mount Gerizim, it wasn’t there anymore. It was destroyed 150 years before this conversation happens.¹ And this Samaritan temple was destroyed by Jews. John Hyrcanus, the Jewish high priest, convinced that prayers offered in any sanctuary other than Jerusalem were blasphemous, led a raid destroying the sanctuary on Mount Gerizim. In time, the power shifted, and 100 years later, Samaritans slaughtered Jews.² The violence went back and forth, the hatred ran both ways, and everybody bled.

So, when she asks Jesus about where to worship, it is not a question about place. It is the question about history.

Philosopher and poet George Santayana says, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” But forgetting the past isn’t easy.

I love Billy Collins’ poem *Forgetfulness*.³

*The name of the author is the first to go
followed obediently by the title, the plot,
the heartbreaking conclusion,*

*the entire novel
which suddenly becomes one
you have never read, never
even heard of,
as if, one by one, the memo-
ries you used to harbor
decided to retire to the south-
ern hemisphere of the brain,
to a little fishing village where
there are no phones.*

*Long ago you kissed the
names of the nine Muses goodbye
and watched the quadratic
equation pack its bag,
and even now as you memo-
rize the order of the planets,
something else is slipping
away, a state flower perhaps,
the address of an uncle, the
capital of Paraguay.*

*Whatever it is you are strug-
gling to remember,
it is not poised on the tip of
your tongue,
not even lurking in some ob-
scure corner of your spleen.*

*It has floated away down a
dark mythological river
whose name begins with an L
as far as you can recall,
well on your own way to
oblivion where you will join those
who have even forgotten how
to swim and how to ride a bicycle.*

Billy Collins is right: Forgetfulness is an unwavering march the mind makes in spite of all efforts to the contrary. I find myself

struggling to remember names of people or where I parked in the KU Hospital garage. When they ask, “Tom, do you want the committee to make their report to the Session in the same fashion as last year?” I just say, “Sure,” and try not to let on that I don’t remember how it was reported last year.

Given this reality, it is odd how I find it impossible to forget some things.

In high school, I needed a car — or so it seemed to me. My grandfather called and said I could buy his Pontiac. It was a chocolate brown Pontiac Catalina with 146,000 miles on it — all of those miles logged on the backroads of South Carolina as he supplied hardware stores with paint supplies. He did that for 55 years.

He said I could have the car for \$500, as is. I gave him \$500. He counted the money, twice, and then gave me the keys. When I got it home, the first thing I had to do was remove the sugar. Little sugar packets, the kind you get in restaurants, were everywhere. They were under the seat and in the seats; in the glove box and even in the defroster vents.

Every day he would go to Hardees for breakfast. He would get a coffee from the drive-through. “Cream and sugar?”

“Just sugar.” He drank his coffee black, but they were offering free sugar. He took it, and at the end of the week, he would come into the kitchen with a handful of sugar packs (obviously not all that he had collected that week). One by one, he would empty them into the kitchen sugar bowl — his “little extra compensation,” he called it.

He did this for the same reason he saved every can and jar. For the same reason he wore his shoes until his feet got wet and wore his shirts until his elbows poked through. This man was a child of the Depression, and that yesterday governed his tomorrow. He never shook the fear that there would not be enough. It was part of almost every conversation.

He lived to be 97. Toward the end, he had few rational thoughts, as his brain was dying more quickly than the rest of him. But the few thoughts that remained were Depression thoughts. He worried. As many days as not, he would return from the cafeteria there in the Presbyterian Home, to discover little sugar packs in the pocket of his sweater, taken from the racks on the tables.

I am like him for reasons beyond genetics. We get trapped by our yesterdays.

That’s why I can forget almost anything, but find it impossible to forget the conversation Carol and I had about curtains in 1986. You don’t need the details (although, I could provide them easily), but suffice it to say, it was a conversation that left us both a bit injured. Because of the injury, the conversation is not only remembered with clarity, but also experiences a resurrection every now and then, finding its way in to other conversations that have nothing to do with curtains.

Santayana says, “Remember the past or you are condemned to repeat it.” When the past involves injury, I think Faulkner is more on point when he said, “The past is never dead. It isn’t even past.”⁴

If you ever go to a new doctor, she will ask you to provide a medical history: issues, surgeries, medicines. She may even want to know about the medical history of your parents and grandparents. Why? Because what happened in the body yesterday has implications for how the body is today.

The heart is the same way. Hearts have a history. Our hearts are shaped by experience — some good, some painful. And we carry that experience with us into new experiences, and it shapes how we see the present. That’s why sometimes I talk about curtains when curtains have nothing to do with what is going on.

Jesus understands that every one of us carries history with us, sometimes dramatic, sometimes less severe, but we all know injury.

Sometimes we bring that injury here. It may be the pain of a failed relationship. The lost job that does more than attack our income; it lays siege to our spirit. Friends betray us or the church lets us down. There are yesterdays we cannot forget. I don’t know what injuries you may bring with you today. But sometimes they rise up into ordinary noontime conversation when we think we are there just to get a sip of water, and all of a sudden, the past is the present. What do we do with this past, Jesus? That’s what she asked.

Miroslav Volf teaches theology at Yale. His theological convictions were shaped by his experience of living in the former Yugoslavia. As a Christian married to an American, he was viewed as a national security

threat and therefore was interrogated. His interrogations were carried out by a man he names 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. . . . 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.”⁵

Captain G. will not find his way along the “mythological river whose name begins with *L*,” to quote Collins. Captain G. will remain alive and present.

Volf suggests that Jesus calls us not simply to remember, but to remember rightly. By that, he means when it can’t be made right, it might need to be forgotten . . . just let it go.

I think there is a miracle in this story. The miracle is that John’s church seems to include Jews and Samaritans. They are together. For them to be together, they must have this conversation. What do we do with this past, Jesus? Jesus’ response to the Samaritan woman invites her to do more than unhinge her prayer from certain geography, but equally so to unhinge it from certain memory.

When things have gone wrong, we do what we can to make them right. But when the past can’t be made right, faith calls us not to forget, but to remember rightly. Jesus reminds us

that we are defined no longer by the past, but rather by the future God creates. Volf says it this way: “Christians believe . . . Instead of being defined by how human beings relate to us, we are defined by how *God* relates to us.”⁶

I have a friend who is a pastor now. He is one of the most faithful pastors I know. Only recently did I learn that he grew up with a mother who faced her own demons. She was, on the one hand, gracious and beautiful 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. They were outside, and he was pushing her in a wheelchair. 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.

No human being can make or unmake us. We are defined by how God relates to us. And we are loved by a God who promises to remember our sin no more.

This we dare not forget.

¹It was destroyed in 128 B.C. It was not a large sanctuary, according to the archeological evidence.

²A brief sketch of this history can be obtained in the Anchor Bible Dictionaries. I consulted articles on Mount Gerizim, Samaritans, and Hyrcanus.

³Billy Collins, “Forgetfulness,” *Sailing Alone Around the Room* (2001), p. 29

⁴Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

⁵Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (2006), p. 6

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 79

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>.