



July 1-2, 2017  
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## *Best Supporting Actor: John Mark* Various texts

I must admit I'm still basking in your remarkable response to the *Beyond These Walls* campaign. In case you haven't heard, our total stands at **\$5,461,848**...and gifts and pledges are still coming in! This vision of eliminating debt and reaching out beyond our walls as never before has captured the hearts of this congregation in a powerful way...including many brand new people. It's just fantastic, and I am so excited!

But last week's Day Camp reminds us of something I said all along: Chapel Hill has *always* been about reaching beyond our walls...especially to kids. You heard that Day Camp enrolled 324 kids. What you *didn't* hear is that 199 of those kids were NOT from Chapel Hill! 74% were from outside our church! You can't get much more "beyond these walls" than that! So, well done, Deb Robertson and your team!

Two weeks ago we were in Sacramento for our annual General Assembly. My daughter, Rachel, a newly minted seminary graduate was there for the first time, which was fun. I also got to hang out with Pastor Jeremy Vaccaro and that was great. But, boy, was it hot! At one point I looked at our car thermometer and it read 117 degrees!

The theme of the Assembly was "Generation to Generation." How can we do a better job handing off the faith to our children and grandchildren? The president of the Barna Institute spoke and shared a shocking statistic: **59% of church kids disconnect from the church after the age of 15!** And he asked a sobering question: "**Do you love your church traditions more than your children?**" The answer in too many churches is, regrettably, yes! But I have never found that here. As long as I've been your pastor, you have loved kids, loved teens, welcomed and encouraged young leaders. It has been one of your passions as a church...and one of the many reasons I love you.

It is a passion we have learned from the New Testament. Jesus poured his life into **young** disciples. So did Paul. You might remember one young disciple because Paul wrote two letters to him. Who was that? Timothy! But in this second sermon in our series "Best Supporting Actor," I want to introduce you to **another** young disciple. He started out shaky...but he ended strong. We have a lot to learn from John Mark. This will require a little detective work to pull the whole story together. Are you ready?

John Mark was the son of a woman named Mary. We first meet him in Acts 12:12 when Peter, who had been arrested and imprisoned for preaching about Jesus, was miraculously freed from jail by an angel. We read that Peter "*went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark...*" He is first mentioned here, and I want you to take note: Mark's relationship with Peter will become *very* important to us. In fact, in Peter's first letter he makes a very tender reference. He calls this young man, "*Mark, my son.*" (1 Peter 5:13.)

There's something else you need to know: Mark was the cousin of Barnabas. Does that name ring a bell? Barnabas means "Son of Encouragement," a nickname given to him by the early church. Barnabas was the guy who believed in Paul's conversion when the apostles thought he was a Jewish spy, sent to

infiltrate the church. It was Barnabas who brought Paul back from exile in his hometown so that together they could pastor the first Gentile church in Antioch. And when that church decided to send Paul and Barnabas on a missionary journey, guess who went with them? John Mark! Evangelist in training!

So off they went. Paul, Barnabas, and Mark sailed to Cyprus where the Lord did spectacular things that resulted in the conversion of the governor. After that, they sailed to the mainland to continue their mission. But while still near the coast, we read these cryptic words in Acts 13:13: *“John left them and returned to Jerusalem.”* We aren’t told the reason for his abrupt departure but there are lots of theories.

- Mark was **homesick**. That’s why he sailed back to Jerusalem.
- Paul contracted **malaria**, and Mark didn’t want to risk catching that horrible disease.
- Mark **objected to Paul’s leadership**. At the start, Barnabas was in charge; his name was always mentioned first until midway through chapter 13 when it flips, which indicates that now, it is Paul who is in charge. Maybe Mark resented this.

And there are other theories, but I think it’s simpler than that. **I think Mark got scared**. They were in an area infamous for bandits. Travelers were commonly assaulted and even murdered. And remember, their experience on Cyprus was very dramatic. It was clear that Paul wasn’t afraid to stir things up—something he proved later on in this same journey when he was attacked by an angry mob and nearly stoned to death. Maybe, for this young man, it was too much; he was terrified. At any rate, whatever the reason, Mark abandoned Paul and Cousin Barnabas and returned to Jerusalem.

After Paul and Barnabas returned from their missionary journey, they rested up and then we read the following in **Acts 15:36**:

*“...after some days Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.’ Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed...”*

Here we see the Son of Encouragement doing what he did best. Encouraging. Sure, Mark left them in the lurch. But he’s just a kid! Give him a break. He deserves another shot. But Paul didn’t see it that way. In fact, the Greek word describing Mark’s “withdrawal” from them is *apostason*. What English word comes from *apostason*? Apostasy! Falling away from the faith. As far as Paul was concerned, Mark’s defection was a dereliction of spiritual duty. He went AWOL. And Paul wasn’t about to give him another chance.

And this leads to one of the saddest moments in the New Testament: Paul and Barnabas split up. Paul takes Silas, and continues his journeys and Barnabas takes Mark and returns to Cyprus. As far as we know—as far as the New Testament is concerned —Paul and Barnabas never see each other again; never labor together again.

Think about that for a moment! It was Barnabas who believed in Paul when no one else did. Barnabas who travelled hundreds of miles to Tarsus to fetch him. Barnabas who disciplined Paul, championed him, and launched him into his apostolic ministry. And it was Barnabas who was willing humbly to turn over the role of leadership to his one-time apprentice. But when it came to Mark, when Paul stubbornly refused to budge on giving Mark another chance, it led to a “sharp disagreement”—and the end of this once great apostolic partnership. I know the Lord used this, but I still find it very sad!

When I was growing up, Dave Newquist was my family pastor. He was the one who prayed for me to go to seminary, who called me to ministry in Bakersfield, who hired me as an Assistant Pastor fresh out of seminary. When I think of Paul and Barnabas separating over this issue, it's like me abandoning Dave Newquist after all he had done for me. I can't even imagine it.

Yet, so far as we know, this was last that Paul ever saw of his mentor. Ironically, that's not the case for John Mark. Later in Paul's ministry when he is writing from prison to the Colossians, we read these words: "Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, **and Mark the cousin of Barnabas...**" Imagine that! Mark who abandoned Paul, perhaps because of the perils that lay ahead, that same Mark is now at Paul's side in prison.

And finally, we turn to the very last words we have from Paul. II Timothy is Paul's last will and testament. It contains the words I want on my tombstone: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith..." But right *after* that passage, we read these words written to young Timothy:

*Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me. **Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.***

Isn't that great? Mark, whom Paul refused to give another chance—because of whom Paul separated from his dearest companion—after all these years, Mark has gone from being a cowardly defector to being someone *very* useful to Paul. I find it ironic that Paul who, in his last words, describes how he has been abandoned by almost everyone on the eve of his execution now summons the young man he once rejected **for abandoning him** because he had become so "useful!" Isn't that an incredible circle?

It turns out Mark wasn't just "useful" to Paul; he was useful to us too; and to the entire Church. What am I talking about? We have four gospels. The very first gospel written based on the reminiscences of Peter was written by a man named...Mark. Yep. The gospel of Mark! How useful has *that* been?

In fact, one more little tidbit: we might have a glimpse of Mark in his own gospel. You remember Gethsemane. Mark 14:51 includes an interesting note. After Jesus was arrested, we read, "*And a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body. And they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked.*"

Only Mark tells this story of a naked young man running away from the soldiers. Ancient historians tell us this was Mark's autobiographical reference to himself. If true, this is fascinating. Because two times in Mark's early life, we find him drawn to Jesus—drawn to those who served Jesus—and yet, when the pressure was on, when the chips were down, he ran away. Not once, but twice.

Honestly, I would have been with Paul on this one! I understand why he would say, "No chance. This kid is unreliable. I don't have time to worry about whether or not he will stick around. I need someone I can trust." There's a reason Paul kicked him to the curb. But years later he ate his own words. The timid kid who could not be counted on in a pinch ended up being the one who stood by Paul in prison and the one he begged to return to him as the day of his own execution approached.

In some ways, this is a story about *two* Best Supporting Actors, isn't it? Barnabas, of course! This wonderful Son of Encouragement, who was always ready to give someone another chance. But also, Mark. The timid kid who abandoned his post. At least once. Maybe twice. But Barnabas never gave up on him, and in the end, Paul had to admit that Barnabas was right, and he welcomed him back as the

truly steadfast friend who had become so useful to his ministry and, in the end, the history of the Christian Church!

I worked for Dave Newquist for nine years doing youth ministry. I have NO IDEA how many times Dave saved my job. In fact, I didn't even know how close I came to getting fired until years later when an elder told me. I was so arrogant...so impulsive. I did crazy things without permission. I hired a helicopter for \$600 to drop flour bombs on kids as they ran through nearby fields. I ran a Halloween car rally where I snuck kids into a cemetery after hours, took them down the casket elevator and into the embalming room where I was lying on a gurney under a sheet holding the next set of clues in my hand. Or there's the time I chewed out one of the office staff with these arrogant words, "I am a youth director; you are *just* a secretary!" Horrifying, right?

And that's just a sample. I made one elder so mad he slapped me in a committee meeting. And there were other things I did that I won't even share with you, things that were unworthy of a minister and for which I probably should have lost my job. But Dave laid himself down on the railroad tracks for me again and again. I must have exhausted him. And frustrated him. And disappointed him. But he never gave up on me because he loved me and believed that God had called me to ministry.

I'll leave it to you to decide whether or not Dave made the right choice; whether it was worth the grief and gray hair I cost him. But I know this: Dave never gave up on me; he never threw me to the curb, even when he had good reason to do so.

I wonder how many listening to this can think of someone in their life—maybe a younger someone—who has disappointed them? Who has abandoned their post, abandoned their faith, abandoned church or school or responsibility or the moral standards you instilled in them? **Maybe you are ready to sweep them to the curb.** Any of you feel that way? Could I just remind you that **the last chapter of that life has not been written!** I know how easy it is to lose heart when someone disappoints you. But God is not finished with them yet! Don't give up hope. Maybe take your bulletin and write down that name. Carry that note in your Bible. Lay them before the Lord every day. Ask God to give them the same grace he showed you and the patience to wait for answered prayer. Don't give up. Don't write them off! One more chance! Who knows: someday, when *you* are in need, you might be asking them to come to your side because they have become so "useful" to you.

And what about those who feel like *they* are John Mark. Who feel hopeless; like a spiritual failure? Who've tried and tried to get it right; who keep making promises to the Lord...and keep running away from him. Keep making promises to people...and disappointing them. Just imagine Mark, the timid defector, sitting with Peter, writing down stories that would become his gospel. Can you imagine how encouraging it must have been to listen as this venerable old disciple spoke of how often HE disappointed Jesus? Like when he sank into the Sea of Galilee because of his fear. Or when Jesus said to him, "Get thee behind me, Satan?" Or when he cut off that servant's ear in Gethsemane and was rebuked by Jesus. And most shamefully, when he denied three times that he even knew Jesus....at the time the Lord needed him most.

**Who better to remind John Mark that Jesus is *always* ready to give another chance** than our favorite disciple who failed Jesus again and again and again and was himself ALWAYS given one more chance? However you have failed, however cowardly you have behaved, Jesus is ready to give you one more chance. Stop...running...away.