

## Paul's Beloved in Christ

### Romans 16:1-16

The second scripture reading for this morning comes from the 16<sup>th</sup> and final chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. This letter is Paul's longest, most detailed, and reasoned accounting of life and faith in Christ. It is his magnum opus, and as he brings it to a close, he wants to give personal greetings to a number of his fellow workers "in Christ." The list is long, and the names difficult to pronounce, and few of us have ever spent much time with this extended greeting.

But in the last several decades there has been a good deal of attention paid to this greeting because it holds a rare glimpse of Paul and the early church. It was written most likely in the late 50s of the first century, somewhere around Corinth. It predates any of the gospels; it predates the custom of calling those who follow Jesus Christian, and Paul most certainly wouldn't have thought that this or any of his letters would one day be revered as holy scripture.

Sarah and I will do this as a responsive reading. Please follow along and send us good thoughts as we attempt to pronounce the names of Paul's friends in Rome.

## Romans 16:1-16

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon<sup>a</sup> of the church at Cenchreae, <sup>a</sup>so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.

**<sup>a</sup>Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, <sup>a</sup>and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. <sup>a</sup>Greet also the church in their house.**

Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert<sup>m</sup> in Asia for Christ. <sup>a</sup>Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you.

**<sup>r</sup>Greet Andronicus and Junia,<sup>a</sup> my relatives<sup>a</sup> who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.**

<sup>a</sup>Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. <sup>a</sup>Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys.

**<sup>o</sup>Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. <sup>a</sup>Greet my relative<sup>a</sup> Herodion.**

Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. <sup>a</sup>Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. <sup>13</sup>

**Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also. <sup>a</sup>Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters<sup>a</sup> who are with them.**

<sup>a</sup>Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.

**<sup>a</sup>Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.**

So, what do we hear in this affectionate greeting penned by Paul?

I notice first that Paul perceives himself as a co-worker. Twenty-nine people are listed here, and Paul knows them and loves them as fellow ministers, apostles, deacons, prison mates, and brothers and sisters in Christ. Obviously, Paul in his many travels had made many friends, and had worked hard alongside many fellow believers. So, with deep affection he sends his greetings to these people who now live in Rome.

Yet perhaps this warm, friendly Paul does match with the image we have formed of him. Perhaps we have thought of him as the great, untouchable one, so busy and so bent on his mission of preaching Jesus, that he couldn't possibly have time to make friends. But here is a whole list of his friends. Perhaps we have the sense that Paul was without peers in terms of his faith in Jesus, but in this listing we see Paul calling by name others as apostles, ministers, beloved co-workers and co-sufferers with him. Perhaps we have the impression that Paul was so focused and intense that he might be a bit arrogant, but here he is reveling in the fellowship of his friends in Christ. He seems to speak with a sincere humility and express deep gratitude for the companionship and work of others.

Put together, these things seem to bump against what we thought we knew about Paul. *Maybe we need to reconsider.*

Paul wrote this letter long before any system of hierarchy of bishops, ministers, elders, deacons and lay people had been created, and long before any Christian church buildings had been erected. It's hard to imagine, but there was no church or basilica in Rome yet; the communities that had been created around faith in Jesus most often met in homes, and these early believers that were Jewish were still worshipping in their synagogues. Furthermore, it is believed that at the time this letter was written, there were maybe 250 Jesus' followers in Rome, gathering in a number of different homes or house churches. With this greeting, we are looking into a very early window of our faith, and what do we see?

I think we see people working together, all taking their faith and obedience to Jesus quite seriously, sharing in the work of living as people who follow in the way of Jesus, loving God and neighbor, trusting that they are made right by God's grace and mercy, and sharing ministry with other followers in different towns and cities. All of this without a church building or church officers or a budget or a building campaign. Imagine that!

What else do we see?

With the help of New Testament scholars we learn that Paul greets quite a mixture of believers. The twenty-nine named in this greeting reveal quite a bit of diversity. Several of the names - (her'mez) Hermes, (nee' re us) Nereus and Persis - were names used for slaves. A number of the names suggest Jewish descent, and Paul identifies some as his relatives. Some are Roman, others Greek, and some are from the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Put together this gives us a picture of a diverse community of faith. There are Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slave and free. Yet, all of these people, from very different stations and lineages are gathered in a number of house groups and together share the identity of being "in Christ." If nothing else, this alone reminds us of what makes a church - we are those gathered around Jesus, and rooted in God's love for all of us.

And there is more! Women make up about a third of the people named. This comes as a surprise to us who have thought Paul taught the submission of women and the suppression of their

voices. But a third of the folks he greets with great affection and admiration are women. What are we to make of this? What was the role of these women?

He greets Prisca and Aquila first. This is a married couple we learn of in Acts. Prisca was named first, which would not have been common in that day, and Paul's switching of the order suggests that her work in and among Jesus' followers made her more prominent than her husband.

Junia, along with her husband (an dro ni' kus) Andronicus were in prison with Paul. Paul names them as prominent among the apostles, saying they were in Christ before I was. Did you catch that? Junia, a woman, was named by Paul as an apostle. What does that do to our common notion of apostles?

Paul describes Prisca, Mary, (tri fe' na) Tryphaena, (tri fo' sa) Tryphosa, and Persis as those who "worked" with him. Our word "work" doesn't fully express what Paul was saying. He uses this word to speak of "apostolic labor"; he is referring to the work of teaching, preaching and healing in Jesus' name, a work that he has shared with many, including these women.

Then there is Phoebe. Before Paul greets those who actually live in Rome, he writes a brief introduction for Phoebe. Beverly Gaventa, the New Testament scholar who was our Festival of Faith speaker last year, translates Paul's introduction in this way.

"I present to you Phoebe, our sister, who is also deacon of the congregation at (Sin' cre a) Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is appropriate for the saints, and assist her in whatever she may need from you. She has been a benefactor of many people, and of myself as well."<sup>i</sup>

Gaventa goes on to explain: "Paul is actually saying quite a lot. She is "our sister" meaning, she is a follower of Jesus Christ. She is from the congregation at (Sin' cre a) Cenchreae, the port city of Corinth, which presumably places both her and Paul in the vicinity of Corinth for the writing of this letter."<sup>ii</sup> Further, "Paul calls Phoebe a deacon, which at this time did not mean someone elected and trained to do certain tasks in the church. Paul in Romans uses this same word to speak of Jesus, and in Corinthians applies it to himself. When Paul says that Phoebe is a deacon, he is strongly saying that she is a spiritual leader in her community, teaching and interpreting the faith.

In addition, Paul also calls Phoebe a benefactor. Then as now, a benefactor is one who uses their considerable wealth to help others. So as a benefactor of many, including Paul, Phoebe's help may well have provided financial support for Paul's work, as well as caring for and hosting a congregation in her home.

With this formal introduction, most interpreters agree that Phoebe was the bearer of this letter to the churches in Rome. "The only reliable mail service that existed was used entirely for the official business of (Roman) government. Private letter writers did the best they could, generally seeking a friend or acquaintance traveling to the destination of the letter. It seems clear that Paul commends Phoebe because she carries the letter."<sup>iii</sup>

Isn't it ironic, as we think of how some of Paul's words have been interpreted to suppress women that his most important was delivered by a woman? If delivered by her, Paul most certainly made sure that "she understood its content and could represent it." And, if delivered by her, Phoebe most likely was the one who read the letter to the gatherings of believers in Rome and the one who first fielded questions and helped them to understand it.<sup>iv</sup>

I think we can see that a great deal of information is tucked into this greeting at the conclusion of Paul's letter. It leads us to ask - what might it mean for us today?

I think it is helpful to be reminded that the early church was a very diverse group. For ages, Jews and Gentiles had had very little to do with each other, but here in the early church they are learning to be a community, to be one in Christ. All the markers that usually keep people apart - gender, class, national or religious groupings - didn't seem to matter in this new community gathered around the good news of Jesus. In Christ the barriers that had long separated people had come down. As Paul wrote in Galatians, "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for all are one in Jesus Christ."<sup>v</sup> Being "in Christ" had given them new eyes to see all people as sisters and brothers, as fellow heirs of God's amazing grace. And this diverse group had joined hands as co-workers in sharing this amazing news.

This was radical news then, and still is. Our present age has gotten very good at seeing difference and division. We have become so divided that we no longer recognize those different from us as our brothers and sisters. We have forgotten that in God's eyes all of God's children are loved and cherished with a compassion we can't even imagine. If we could be rooted and grounded "in Christ" like Paul and the early church, we too might have eyes to see beyond our differences and see the deep kinship that binds us all together.

And, we need to consider what this greeting has to say about women, both in the first century and now. Much ink has been spilled for many centuries to keep women out of leadership roles in the church, by some of Paul's words from other letters, and even the Adam and Eve story. Truly you can justify about any form of oppression if you quote a few bible verses instead of considering the whole sweep of the biblical witness. But after reading this greeting where Paul names women as apostles, co-workers, and deacons, who have worked alongside men, including himself, does that prejudice hold up? Remember it was Paul who said, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Who are we to exclude?

Careful attention to our biblical texts remind us of the radical nature of God's call and inclusion, found even in this often ignored greeting by Paul. Romans 16 reminds us that careful listening to our sacred texts will forever challenge and turn upside down traditions and norms of the society in which we live. Paul was doing an incredibly new thing to cherish and work with the diversity represented in the early church. But it all came about because of his deep rootedness "in Christ." In Christ, Paul and his beloved friends were becoming an answer to Jesus' prayer that we all may be one.<sup>vi</sup>

May we, in our day, live so deeply "in Christ" that we, as a church and as individuals, also become an answer to Jesus' prayer.

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<sup>i</sup> Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *When in Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), p. 9.

<sup>ii</sup> Gaventa, p. 9.

<sup>iii</sup> Gaventa, p.12.

<sup>iv</sup> Gaventa, p. 13.

<sup>v</sup> Galatians 3:28.

<sup>vi</sup> John 17:20-21.

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