

## **Faith Evangelical Free Church**

### **Romans 16:1-16 -- Thinking of You: Reflections on Paul's Greetings to the Believers in Rome**

**Sunday, May 15, 2016**

#### **Introduction:**

The passage we're going to be learning from today is from Romans Chapter 16 -- which is a BIG deal, because Chapter 16 is the LAST chapter in this book, meaning that next week Pastor Steve will preach the final message of what has been for this church a year-and-a-half-long journey through the apostle Paul's letter to the church in Rome.

Throughout the first fifteen chapters of this book we've been blessed to read and study rich theology, foundational Christian doctrine, and essential practices for our everyday walk with Christ and our interactions with friends, families, and fellow believers in Jesus.

Today's passage, however, is unlike anything else we've seen in the book of Romans -- in fact, it's unlike anything else in the whole New Testament. Instead of robust biblical teachings and lofty doxologies, Romans 16:1-16 is brimming with gratitude, greetings, and everyone's favorite biblical reading material...NAMES!

Lots and lots of names, twenty-seven names to be exact. It's the largest concentration of names in the entire New Testament, all but one found within a string of sixteen consecutive sentences beginning with the word "greet". It's the kind of passage that often gets omitted from devotionals, skipped in Bible studies, and acknowledged but rarely explored in sermon series, because it's hard to draw any deeper meaning from what seems like little more than Paul saying "hello" to his friends in Rome.

But when reading a passage like this it's important to remember that God did not preserve what we have today as Scripture without meaning or purpose. Although we don't know the character or actions of the men and women listed in Romans 16 as well as we know Peter or Paul, their lives and their faith are significant to God.

This passage doesn't prescribe any action or demand any change. It briefly and simply illustrates that all of the doctrine and theology we've read about in Romans 1-15 mattered in the day-to-day lives of ordinary believers in the 1st century just as it does today for you and for me.

**And the first way it does this is by affirming the truth that as Christians we're brought together in our churches and communities to help one another.**

***The Christian Life Is Not Meant To Be Attempted Alone***

I think we often fall into the trap of believing that the greatest measure of strength, or of courage, or of ability is how much we can accomplish all on our own and by ourselves.

Just think about it -- in school or at our jobs, we dread being assigned group projects because we know we'll have to rely on others and fear our work will be diminished or overlooked.

In sports we're quick to rally behind the cry of "There is no 'I' in 'Team'", and yet ESPN fills programming hours debating things like the most valuable player, and the entire entertainment industry of fantasy sports is built upon evaluating, valuing, and praising the statistical accomplishments of individual athletes.

This "all-by-myself" attitude all too often creeps its way into our understanding of faith as well.

When seeking a spiritual pick-me-up we're quick to call upon such verses as "I can do all things through Christ who gives ME strength", or we survey the lists of spiritual gifts searching for the strengths the Holy Spirit may be cultivating in us so we can be better equipped to carry out our own ministry...

...but as we try to do our best on our own we forget that as brothers and sisters in Christ we've been brought together (as the church) to help one another and work together, building one another up, leaving no one on their own.

This is exactly what Pastor Steve taught about last week -- that the Christian life is not meant to be attempted alone, and that we're actually at our best when we depend upon one another. And in today's passage we see that truth played out in the life of Paul as he greets and expresses gratitude for his friends, his community, the men and women he was completely dependent upon to achieve his goals and pursue his calling.

In vv. 1-2, we read about Phoebe:

*"I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well."*

Phoebe was commended, or introduced, to the the Christians in Rome as a woman of great faith and a devoted leader in her church. The word translated as "servant" in verse one comes from the Greek *diakonos*, from which we derive our word for and our understanding of the office of "deacon". As a deacon Phoebe would have been responsible for caring for her community -- helping and protecting the vulnerable and needy, visiting the sick and perhaps even providing financial oversight to her church.

She was also a patron to Paul -- meaning at minimum she generously supported his work as a missionary, and perhaps even used her status as a member of the Roman upper class in Paul

and other Christian's favor. That Paul began by "commending" her likely indicates that Phoebe was the person who delivered this letter to the church Rome, making her the courier of one of the most important Christian documents in history.

In vv. 3-7, we read about Pirsca, Aquila, Epaenetus, Mary, Andronicus, and Junia:

*"Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me."*

Prisca (shorthand for "Priscilla") and Aquila -- who are also mentioned several times in Acts 18 -- were likely close friends of Paul, working alongside as missionaries. At one point Paul says they these two saved his life. They, like Paul, have shared the Gospel all over the Empire, devoting not only themselves but also their marriage to evangelism and discipleship.

Paul also greets Andronicus and Junia, who he calls kinsmen and fellow prisoners, perhaps indicating that they were (like Paul) Jewish Christians, and at one point were imprisoned with him on account of their preaching and teaching. That they were "known to" or "known among" the apostles (v. 7) likely means that they were an officially commissioned missionary couple.

If you were to continue reading vv. 8-16, you'd see that every sentence contains another name and another mention of how the recipient of Paul's greeting was either known by him, served with him, or had helped him during his travels throughout the empire.

Here's the bottom line: In no way was Paul ever, at any point in his ministry, a lone ranger -- and we shouldn't be either. We're created to be in community.

You and I are incapable — BY DESIGN — of maintaining our faith on our own, of having success in ministry on our own, of really understanding the Gospel of Jesus Christ on our own. We need people praying for us, encouraging us, discipling us, sometimes we need people to provide materially for us -- not because we're needy or lazy, but because you and I and everyone else who attends Faith E Free have been brought together to help one another in love and obedience to God.

If you're struggling with loneliness, or feel spiritually stuck in one place, unable to grow and mature as a believer in Christ, or perhaps you feel mature but are burdened by the many, many cares laid upon your heart...this morning I want you to honestly consider whether or not you're trying to do too much on your own.

Sometimes the bravest and strongest thing we can do is say "I need help." Sometimes the most godly, most Christ-like thing we can do is rely on and lean into the community our good and loving God has created for us and brought us to be a part of.

My first year at Denver Seminary was really, really difficult. I was living in completely new city, I had no friends or family nearby, school was WAY harder than I'd anticipated...and shortly after I began my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer, and I struggled with understanding how I was supposed to support her from 500 miles away.

For the first 8 months or so, I tried to deal with all these changes and challenges on my own. It didn't go well. I came \*this close\* to dropping out and giving up on pastoral ministry. But then...I got a phone call. A guy I had classes with at the seminary invited me to come study Greek with him. He had no idea I was struggling, had no idea how much I needed something as simple as a friendly conversation about how hard a dead language was to learn...but I really, really did. That invitation and conversation began a relationship that saved seminary for me. I tried to do it alone. I couldn't do it alone. When I finally began to engage in the community around me, I discovered a similar truth the one Paul knew thousands of years ago:

That as followers of Christ, we've have been brought together -- by our common love and devotion to our Savior -- to help one another. The Christian life is not meant to be attempted alone.

**I think another aspect of the Christian life affirmed by this passage is that all our contributions -- big and small -- are worthy of honor and matter deeply to God.**

If I were to ask you to comb through this passage and list all the ministries or ways that the people Paul greets and gratifies either served or were served by others...I wonder how many you might come up with?

A few of them would be obvious, right? They'd be the ones we just looked at in vv. 1-7 -- deacons, patrons, missionaries, teachers, preachers...the kind of activities we normally associate with the idea of "ministry."

But in vv. 8-16 Paul continues to address various members of the Roman community, and as he does so he does something really important: he recognizes and honors not only the big marquee ministers and their ministries...but also greets and praises many individuals whose commitment to the Lord and service to others was likely expressed in their day to day activities, not formal ministries.

Of the 19 names remaining in vv. 8-16, at least twelve of them belonged to slaves or men and women who had been slaves. It's unlikely they had the resources or freedom of movement enjoyed by Phoebe, Priscilla, Aquila, and the others; nevertheless, they lived their lives in such a way that led Paul to greet them as "beloved in the Lord"; "fellow worker in Christ"; "kinsmen" and fellow believers "in the Lord".

I can't tell you exactly what kinds of things these people did -- it's just not here in the text. But I can tell you that their callings and commitments mattered to Paul, and more than that, they mattered to God as well.

Maybe you're involved in big, incredible, international or community transforming ministries. Maybe week after week you return to a ministry you know is making a difference, but in such a way that is difficult for others to see or understand. Maybe your ministry is focused on being a good dad, mowing your elderly neighbor's lawn, giving anonymous gifts to friends who've had a rough day, or running your business in such a way that takes a few losses but uphold moral and ethical practices.

Whatever you do, ALL that you do...everything that feels big and everything that seems too small to matter...ALL OF IT MATTERS TO GOD. It's worthy of being recognized and honored. I'm sorry that I cannot from here call you by name and tell you thank you for all you do...but THANK YOU. Thank you for all your commitments to selflessness, to sacrifice, and to loving others as Christ loves them.

**There's one more observation to be made in regards to this passage.**

You've probably noticed by now, but Paul addresses a pretty diverse group of people. There are no fewer than nine women, at least a couple of house churches, slaves and freed men and women from at least two and possibly three upper class families, and an indiscernible mixture of races, ethnicities, and pre-Christian religious backgrounds -- all of them making one big, happy church family in the city of Rome.

In many ways this passage illustrates the kind of church Paul was describing when he wrote in his letter to the church in Galatia,

*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

*(Galatians 3:28 ESV)*

**As Christians we must be committed to bringing down and working across barriers that keep us separated from one another and from those who have not yet come to know Christ as their Savior.**

For me, this is one of the hardest things to do as a believer. Perhaps many of you have experienced the difficulty, the discomfort, and even wrestled with some of the fear of reaching out and connecting to someone unlike yourself, who does not share your same experiences.

From what we've read in our passage today, it's not that hard to imagine some of the tensions these believers experienced as they worked to love one another across their contexts.

In vv. 8-12, we read:

*Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord.*

There's a pretty good chance that everyone in those 5 verses was a slave or former slave...can you imagine how nervous Phoebe may have been, with all her wealth and status, walking into a church community predominately populated with slaves and those trapped in the Roman lower classes?

Or how about what we read in vv. 13-16:

*Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.*

On the surface nothing seems too terribly inflammatory, but if we were to study all these names, we'd learn that Rufus and his mother are likely the only ethnic Jews among all these believers and house church leaders in Rome -- the rest are Gentiles, from all over the empire. A great deal of why Paul wrote to the Romans was to help settle the tensions between these two groups.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is too good, too precious, and too wonderful to let things like wealth, poverty, race, ethnicity, or religious background keep us from enjoying it and sharing it with as many as possible.

Here at Faith, we're involved with a number of groups dedicated to this kind of hope -- that people from all over the world and all different contexts can meet together and talk about Christ.

For example...

World Friendship is an organization established for American and international women in Manhattan and the surrounding areas to make new friends and help with the transition into a new home and new culture.

Circle Manhattan is an organization dedicated to helping individuals transition out of poverty by connecting them to mentoring and supportive friendship, working across and at times eliminating the barriers often felt between those with wealth and those without.

Our lifegroups here at Faith serve the purpose to create greater community and deeper discipleship within the congregation. And although those groups often form among people with similar stories and backgrounds, wouldn't it be great to invite some people, or join a group of people, who aren't like you, and every week or every month hear from a perspective totally unlike your own?

I challenge all of us, myself included, to take seriously the truth that as Christians we must be committed to bringing down and working across barriers that keep us separated from one another and from those who have not yet come to know Christ as their Savior.

I hope that we can all be committed to recognizing, celebrating, and honoring the many different ways we participate in ministry, great and small, in our everyday lives.

And I beg you all to remember that as Christians we've been brought together to help one another -- the Christian life is not meant to be attempted alone.

I want to close by reading an excerpt from an EXCELLENT book, ***Visions of Vocation***, by Steve Garber. Throughout the entire book he wrestles with the question, "Knowing what we know about the world, what will we choose to do?" And I think in a lot of ways that question serves to draw us into deeper consideration of what it means to live in community, honor one another, and seek to love those different than ourselves.

*"Knowing what I know, what will I do? There are people who see themselves implicated in the way the world is and ought to be. For love's sake, they see themselves as responsible for the way the world turns out. Sometimes they are bankers, and sometimes they make hamburgers. But always and everywhere, they are people who have vocations in imitation of the vocation of God: knowing the worst about the world, and still loving the world. They are people who learn to live in the tension of life, living with what is and longing for what will be -- keeping clear of the great temptations, for the sake of the world. Simply said, they become hints of hope."*

HEAVENLY FATHER,

LET THAT BE OUR PRAYER: THAT THROUGH HELPING ONE ANOTHER, HONORING ONE ANOTHER, AND SEEKING TO CROSS BARRIERS IN ORDER TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER, THAT WE WOULD BECOME "HINTS OF HOPE" TO EACH OTHER AND IN THIS CITY -- NOT SO THAT WE WOULD GAIN GLORY, BUT SO THAT YOUR NAME AND CHRIST'S LOVE WOULD BE KNOWN AND CHERISHED BY MANY -- OR BETTER YET, ALL -- THAT WE MEET.

I THANK YOU FOR THIS MORNING, LORD. I ASK THAT THE TRUTH OF YOUR WORD WOULD WORK DEEPLY AND RICHLY IN OUR HEARTS THIS WEEK.

AMEN.