

Welcome Home
Romans 16:1–27
Makemie Presbyterian Church
January 20, 2008

Romans 16

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon^{*} of the church at Cenchreae,² 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.

3 Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus,⁴ and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.⁵ Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert^{*} in Asia for Christ.⁶ Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you.⁷ Greet Andronicus and Junia,^{*} my relatives^{*} who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.⁸ Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord.⁹ Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys.¹⁰ Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus.¹¹ Greet my relative^{*} Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus.¹² Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord.¹³ Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also.¹⁴ Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters^{*} who are with them.¹⁵ Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.¹⁶ Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

17 I urge you, brothers and sisters,^{*} to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offences, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them.¹⁸ For such people do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites,^{*} and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded.¹⁹ For while your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, I want you to be wise in what is good, and guileless in what is evil.²⁰ The God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.^{*}

21 Timothy, my co-worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sospater, my relatives.*

22 I Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord.*

23 Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you.*

25 Now to God* who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages²⁶ but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—²⁷ to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom* be the glory for ever! Amen.

I hope you will not feel guilty if your heart was not all aflutter during the reading of the text. It's not very interesting. It's a list of strange names. We were always told in preaching class, "Avoid the lists. They're deadly." Here it seems that Paul is calling the roll, which is a strange thing in itself. I have never worshipped in a church in which someone got up & called roll.

Sometimes, calling the roll is not all that bad. One December I was summoned to Superior Court, Travis County, Texas, to serve on the jury. On Monday morning at nine o'clock, 240 of us formed a pool out of which the jurors for civil and criminal cases would be chosen.

The deputy clerk of the superior court stood and called all 240 names. She did not have them in alphabetical order, so you had to really listen.

There were two Bill Johnsons. One was black, and one was white, but they were both Bill Johnson.

There was a man named Clark who answered when the clerk read, "Mrs. Clark."

He said, "Here."

She looked up and said, "Mrs. Clark."

"Here."

"*Mrs. Clark.*"

Then he stood up and said, "Well, I thought the letter was for me, and I opened it."

The clerk said, "We summoned Mrs. Clark."

"Well," he said, "I'm here. Can I do it? She doesn't have any interest in this sort of thing."

The clerk said, "Mr. Clark, how do you know? She doesn't even know she's been summoned."

This roll call was pretty good. There was a man whose name I wrote down phonetically because I couldn't spell it. His name was Zurfell Lichenstein. I remember it because they went over it five or six times, mispronouncing it each time. He insisted it be pronounced correctly and

finally stood in a huff and said, "I see no reason why I should serve on a jury in a court that can't pronounce my name."

The woman next to me said, "Lichenstein. I wonder if he's a Jew."

I said, "Well, I don't know. Could be. Does it matter?"

"I am German. My name is Zeller."

"Well, it doesn't matter. That was fifty years ago."

"He and I could be seated next to each other in a jury."

"Well, you were probably just a child when all of that happened years ago."

"I was ten years old. I visited Grandmother, who lived about four miles from Buchenwald. I smelled the odor."

A person could get interested in Paul's roll call, if only to say, I wonder how Paul knew all those people since he had never been to the church. I wonder if you could buy mailing lists back then?

I could get interested in the roll call because it gives a sociological profile of the membership of the church. I don't expect you to remember this, but in the list there is a husband and wife, Aquila and Priscilla. There's a man named Rufus and his mother. There is a brother, Nereus, and sister.

There are brothers, Andronicus and Junias. There are sisters, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. There is an old man, Epeanetus. Isn't that an interesting profile of the church? There's a single woman, Mary. There's a single man, Herodion. Not a lot of nuclear family there at all except as Christ has called them together. It's an interesting list—sort of. No, not very.

But for Paul it's not a list. He's packing his things in the home of Gaius, who hosts the church in Corinth, and who is currently hosting Paul. Paul is getting ready to go west to Italy and Spain. He's about to move to a new parish far away. He is now about fifty-nine or sixty years old, and he feels he has one more ministry in him.

He doesn't have much to pack—his coat, his books, and a few other things. While he is throwing things away to trim down the load for packing and moving, Paul comes across some notes and correspondence. He sits down among the boxes and begins to remember the people in the notes.

You've done it yourself. On our last Sunday of service at the student church during seminary, the church gave my husband and me a gift. It was a quilt some of the women of the church had made, and they stitched into the top of the quilt the names of all the church members. Every time we'd

move, we'd come across that quilt. We would spread it out on the bed, and we'd start remembering.

We remembered something about Chester, who persuaded the elders to vote against my raise. We remembered Mary and John who put new tires on our car. Roy was very quiet and never said anything. Then there was his wife Marie. There is this marvelous woman who lived with that man who drank and became violent, and yet she was always faithful and pleasant. He was dying with cancer when we went. He was the first person I performed a funeral for.

This is the way we go over the quilt.

What Paul wrote in Romans 16, then, wasn't a list. He was remembering people who were special to him:

Aquila and Priscilla, they risked their necks for me. Andronicus and Junias, we were in jail together. They're great Christians. There's Mary. Mary worked hard. She was there when everybody else quit. She's the one who always said, "Paul, you go on home. I'll put things up. I'll put the hymnals away, pick up all the papers, and straighten the chairs. You go on home. You're tired."

"Well, Mary, you're tired too."

"Yes, Paul, but you've got to ride a donkey across Asia tomorrow. You go on. I'll pick up here." Mary worked hard.

Epaenetus was the first person converted under my preaching, and I didn't sleep a wink that night. I spent the whole night saying, "Thank God, finally somebody heard." What a marvelous day that was.

Tryphaena and Tryphosa were twins. You hear it, don't you, in the names? They always sat on the right, and they both wore blue every Sunday. I never knew them apart, really. One of them had a mole on her cheek, but I didn't know if it was Tryphaena or Tryphosa. I never did get them straight.

Tell Rufus "hello." Tell his mother "hello" because she's my mother, too.

Some woman earned from the apostle Paul the title "mother." He probably stayed in their home. She must have been a rather large woman who always wore an apron with a lot of things stuffed inside of it. She was the kind of woman who could say to him, "Sit down and eat your breakfast. I don't care if you are an apostle. You've got to eat."

I remember when I first saw the famous list in D.C. The workers set it up to run up and down the landscape- block after block—to form a long wall of names: Vietnam names.

Some of us looked at it like it was a list of names. Others walked slowly down the column. There was the woman who went up and put her finger on a name, and she held a child up and put the child's hand on a name. There was a woman there who kissed the wall at a name. There were flowers lying beneath the wall.

Don't call that a list. It's not a list.

In fact, these names in Romans 16 are extremely special to Paul, because even though he says "hello" to them, what he's really saying is "goodbye." He's going to Rome. Before he goes to Rome he has to go to Jerusalem. He's going with the offering into a nest of hostility. So at the end of chapter fifteen, he says to these people: Pray with me. Agonize with me that I won't be killed in Jerusalem, that the saints will accept the money in Jerusalem, and that I'll get to come back and be with you.

These are not just names.

Before I married, I moved down to a little village on the Tombigbee River between Memphis and Birmingham. It was the custom in that church at Easter to have a baptismal service, and it was held in the Tombigbee River at sundown on Easter evening. Out on a sand bar, I stood with the candidates for baptism. After they were immersed, the candidates moved out of the water, changed clothes in little booths constructed of hanging blankets, then went to the fire in the center. Last of all, I went over, changed clothes, and went to the fire where the little congregation was gathered, singing and cooking supper.

Once we were all around the fire, Fred Honilee—always Fred—introduced the new people. He gave their names, where they lived and worked. Then the rest of us formed a circle around them while they stayed warm at the fire.

The next part of the ritual was that each person around the circle gave her or his name and said,

"My name is____, and if you ever need somebody to do washing and ironing, call on me."

"My name is____, and if you ever need anybody to chop wood, call on me."

"My name is____, and if you ever need anybody to baby-sit, call on me."

"My name is____, and if you ever need anybody to repair your house, call on me."

"My name is____, and if you ever need anybody to sit with the sick, call on me."

"My name is____, and if you ever need a car to go to town, call on me."

And around the circle we went. Then we ate and had a square dance. Finally at the appointed time, Percy Pickens, with thumbs in his bibbed overalls, would stand up and say, "It's time to go." Everybody would leave. After my first experience of that, he saw me standing there, still. He looked at me and said, "Debra, folks don't ever get any closer than this."

In that community, their name for that kind of ritual is "church."

Write these words: "I thank my God for all my remembrance of you."
Now write a name. Write another name, and another name, and another. Keep the list, because to you, it's not a list. In fact, the next time you move, hold on to that list. Even if you have to leave your car, and your library, and your furniture, and your laptop, and everything else, take that list with you. In fact, when your ministry has ended and you leave the earth, take it with you.

I know, I know. When you get to the gate, St. Peter's going to say:
Now, look: you went into the world with nothing. You're going to come out
of it with nothing. What do you have there?

"Well, it's just some names."

"Well, let me see it."

"It's just a list of names of folk I worked with and folk who helped me."

"Well, let me see it."

"It's just a group of people that, if it weren't for them, I'd have never
made it."

"I want to see it."

Finally, you give it to him, and he smiles. He says, "I know all of them.
In fact, on my way here to the gate I passed them. They were painting a
great big sign to hang over the street, and it said, 'Welcome home.'"