

On the Journey to Relationship  
Romans 16:1–16 and Matthew 26:6–13  
Fifth Sunday in Lent A – Women’s Lectionary  
Preached at FPC, 03-26-23

Oh, boy...that text from Romans today! WHEW! That was a doozy! I figured if I made Sara read that text today she might never speak to me again. Can’t say as I would blame her!

So many difficult to pronounce names, all together in one list.

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When I was growing up, one of my Sunday School teachers – in order to encourage us as new readers to tackle difficult Bible texts – told us whenever we encountered a word we didn’t know how to pronounce, we could just substitute the word “donut” in its place. This text from Romans would have had a LOT of “donuts.”

As an adult I’ve learned to just do your best and read with confidence and good humor. After all, no one will know if you’ve mispronounced these names, anyway! No one is going to notice if you get it wrong.

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This text from Romans 16 is frequently avoided – just like similar texts in the Bible with lists of difficult-to-pronounce names – like the genealogies of Jesus in Matthew 1 and Luke 3 – or similar lists of tongue-twisting, multisyllabic, ancient and exotic Hebrew names like those found in 1 Chronicles 26 or the census lists in Numbers 1 and 26.

We tend to avoid these passages, assuming there is nothing of significance contained in the lists. There is nothing it can teach us. But actually, there is treasure buried here. And for those with the fortitude and courage to dive in, these passages can reward us with insight and wisdom.

This morning...let’s find the treasure here, together.

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Our Romans passage lists 29 names and, except for Phoebe, who is in Cenchræe (Sin’-cree-ā), the remaining 28 are all in Rome. Of the 29 names, ten are women’s names – nearly one-third – which is remarkable when you consider this was first century Rome we are talking about.

Marg Mawczko (Moss-koh) points out:

What is especially interesting...is that seven of the ten women are described in terms of their ministry (Phoebe, Prisca, Mary, Junia, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis). By comparison, only three men are described in terms of their ministry (Aquila, Andronicus, Urbanus), and two of these men are ministering alongside a female partner (Aquila with Prisca, Andronicus with Junia). These are numbers worth remembering.

It is apparent that women were active in significant ministries in the church at Rome. It is also apparent that Paul has no problem with these women. Rather, he affirms them and their ministries.

Craig Keener says it even more concisely when he says: “Romans 16 greets twice as many men as women, but commends twice as many women as men.”

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We know, too, that some of the names in the list are Jewish, but the majority are Gentile names. And among the names are a few that were common names for slaves of the time.

And so we can see in Romans 16 that it is true what we read in Galatians 3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” All of these folks, taken together, are leaders in the church at Rome...with all of their many distinctions and differences.

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In our passage Paul identifies his connection with each person on the list. For some he recalls traumas they endured together, like imprisonment and the risk of death. There are four on the list that Paul refers to as his “beloved,” or close personal friends. A couple Paul claims kinship with – or relationships that are close enough to be family.

Paul uses the terms “worker” or “laborer” to refer to ministers. He admires and appreciates the “hard work,” or ministry, of many he mentions. And his “coworkers” whom he names in this passage are those he ministered alongside.

Indeed, Paul had a history and connection and relationship with each and every one on this list.

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And so you see, in this passage that we would be tempted to overlook, skip, or otherwise ignore, there is much depth here. There is indeed a treasure to find. In just a few verses we have uncovered a wealth of information about Paul, those he associates with, and those he cherishes.

This is a letter to the leaders and shakers in the early church at Rome. And Paul counts among them women and men, Jews and Gentiles, enslaved and free persons. All are one in Christ Jesus. And they rely on, support, and collaborate together to serve God and the church, each using their own gifts and graces for ministry. Each exercising their own skills. Each sharing with their own circle of influence. Growing together, for the betterment of their community and this new spiritual path they have found.

Paul has a relationship with each of these 29 people. They have relationships with one another, too. They rely on each other, work together, share in ministry, and grow the church. Despite whatever differences or even disagreements that might exist between them, they are united in their efforts to build – together – the church...the body of Christ.

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I'd like to direct your attention to the cover of your bulletin – or the image on the screen. It is a sculpture created in 2017 by the artists Simon Donovan and Ben Olmstead that can be found in Tucson, Arizona. It is comprised of hundreds of parallel, vertically aligned, laser-cut “slices” of stainless steel, welded together with each layer held an inch apart by pegs. The sculpture sits on a five-sided, fluted concrete pedestal, and it gives the effect of an ever-shifting image as one moves around the piece: “looking topographical to almost disappearing straight-on.” (<https://donovanolmstead.com/unity.html>)

The project was described by the city of Tucson this way:

The sculpture...is comprised of five figures, three female, two male...They stand in a circle facing outward, holding hands and leaning far forward. They would tumble forward if not for the cooperation, trust, and collective effort that is required in forming an unbroken ring. Thus the title “Unity.”

When I saw this sculpture I was overwhelmed by its beauty, but also by its message. These five figures of women and men are “leaning outward as far as possible without falling, only through the cooperation of holding hands.” And it made me think of our passage from Romans for today, and the women and men “coworkers” of Paul. It made me think, too, about the Church (capital C) today, as well as this congregation of FPC that we love so much.

It is our relationships of trust and cooperation that help us share the Gospel message with a hurting world. It is our effort to hold hands and stretch out as far as we can that helps us serve the marginalized and dispossessed. It is our ability to risk and to lean into our fears that help us to grow on our spiritual journey – individually and collectively.

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In this season of Lent, I invite you to consider how our relationships mold us, make us, and impact our ministries. I encourage you to contemplate how our relationships define us as a church. I ask you to think about how our relationships speak to our values and our commitments.

Let's hold hands and stretch as far as we possibly can. Let's include everyone – especially those society rejects. Let's work together to bring about God's kin-dom here on earth.

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Will you pray with me?

Living, loving God, help us to create, maintain, and grow our relationships with one another, so that we might share your message of love and welcome for all people. We need each other as we minister to this hurting world. And help us to always remember you are with us. Amen.