



30 August 2015: 14th Sunday after Pentecost
FUMC, 1928 Ross Avenue, Dallas, Texas 75201
“Who Are These People?”—Preaching Text: Romans 16

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The easiest kind of relationship for me is with ten thousand people.
The hardest is with one (Joan Baez).
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In the December 1941 issue of *Time* magazine, a story appears that author Bill Bryson would later call a “Ray Buduick story.” Buduick decided to take his private plane up for a Sunday morning spin as he often did. Unluckily for him, this was on 7 December 1941—and did I mention that Buduick lived near Honolulu. Early that morning the Japanese Air Force launched an aerial assault on the United States. As Bryson wrote it:

As he headed out over Pearl Harbor, Buduick was taken aback, to say the least, to find the western skies dark with Japanese Zeroes, all bearing down on him Miraculously he managed to land his plane safely in the midst of the greatest airborne attack yet seen in history, and lived to tell the tale, and in so doing became the first American to engage the Japanese in combat, however inadvertently” (Bill Bryson, *Made In America: An Informal History of the English Language in the United States*, Black Swan Press, 1994).

You just never know. For this reason I recommend worship to those venturing out on Sunday mornings. In line with this story, perhaps we can acknowledge that we live by lists—various kinds perhaps, but lists even so. For example, there is a data base titled: “Full Pearl Harbor Casualty List” with **2402** names on the list. For one more case, “The Vietnam Veterans Memorial” pays tribute to those who served in the Vietnam War. The Washington DC memorial is a black granite wall inscribed with the names of **58,209** American’s killed or missing from Vietnam. If you remember the old “White pages” then you know what a list of names looks like.

Am I on the list of those accepted to my first choice of college? Did I make the list of those not downsized by my company? Did I make the list to be in the World Series ticket lotto? Do I want to be on the list? We all have our lists. Maybe I have a list of my favored First Church senior pastors: Bishop Ben Oliphant, Rev. John Fieldler, or Dr. Andy Stoker—& favorite

associates too—Linda Roby, Wally Chappell, Dale Hunt, Blair Thompson

The Bible also is full of lists. In the Hebrew scripture there is a table of nations, a list of Israel's tribes, and a quite famous list of commandments. In the New Testament there is the list of disciples, a list of Jesus' ancestors (in both Matthew and Luke). Our lesson today from Paul's epistle to the church at Rome reads like a list. In Romans 16, Paul delivers a list of people to whom he sends greetings. From the beginning, it seems as if the church bears responsibility for keeping lists.

Over the years, it has been amazing to me how many people will phone church offices in Dallas and Waco and Fort Worth and Arlington and ask: "Are we still members of the church." Really, they mean: "Are we on the list?" They say, "Well, we were members back in the '70s. Why aren't we now?" A check of the church records shows that many of these have neither attended nor given to their church in twenty or thirty years. Yet these become petulant because the church is so rigorous in its demands. Now you tell me, who is fooling whom? To get on the church list all one does is make a covenant promise to God. Like our own families, the church is at its best when it is a place to make and keep promises.

Our profession is that the church and its list are matters of life and death. This is why we go to the trouble, week in and week out, to connect people on the list with the Jesus story. We teach our children, we invite special speakers from around the country and around the world, we hire people on our church staff—all for the express purpose of helping us understand and stand under the promises God has made to us in the life and death of Jesus. This is why we all want to be on the list. Would you like to hear Paul's list in Romans 16—his last chapter, epistle, and word to us?

[16:1] 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 offenses, 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 Sosipater, 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. [24] [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 ages [26] 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 forever! Amen (Romans 16:1-27).

“Who are these people?” we might well ask. And what about Paul, the one sent by God who first got started in controversy and ended up as the ultimate convert in church history. Let us look at this Paul for a moment.

First, Paul was the right person at right time for the task of spreading the gospel in the Mediterranean Basin. Paul was not only a Greek speaking and Jewish Pharisee, but also a Roman Citizen. Paul had absolute access to every corner of the world in which he lived. Not only this, but **second**, Paul was a magnificent church planter and you remember from Sunday school about all his missionary journeys: first journey trace in red; second journey is green; third journey is blue and so on.

Third, depending to which school of biblical scholarship you subscribe, Paul wrote either 7 or 13 New Testament epistles—which means no matter how we slice it, Paul as an individual wrote more books of the Bible than any other single person.

Fourth, Paul was a “walking seminary” as he mentored a generation of pastors/

missionaries to the gentiles—Barnabas, Lydia, Silas, Timothy, John Mark, Titus, Pricilla and Aquila, Epaphroditus, and others.

Fifth, Paul was the church’s first theologian and ethicist: Paul put Jesus’ teachings into practical language and helped the church develop its moral sense.

Farewell speeches in the Ancient world were customary. This is when the hero-leader would offer a last word to those she/he left behind—Plato offers “The Apology;”—Lincoln “the Second Inaugural;” or when Dwight Eisenhower speaks to the American people for the last time as president. Ike warns about the growing influence of the “military-industrial complex.”

Thus after all Paul has accomplished, his farewell speech is in essence the last chapter of his last epistle. This chapter 16 constitutes Paul’s last word in his last letter. It is his farewell address. But how strange that Paul’s last words, this ambassador of Christ, church planter, scripture writer, mentor, eminent theologian and ethicist would “howdy up” a bunch of people from his past. In this chapter 16 Paul implicitly or explicitly names 37 individual names. Paul’s last words in his last chapter of his final epistle concerned relationships:

- 1) Relationships with people Paul had ministered to
- 2) Relationships with people that had ministered to Paul

If a person’s last words are among the most important words that she/he speaks, then what Paul says to Christians is that relationships with others in God are the things that last and the last things. It is relationships that ultimately matter most.

In an odd way, one of the most important lists we keep today is the list of saints who have passed on to glory. Nine Sundays from now we will read saint’s names on All Saints Sunday. When we do, I hope we remember that among all the really vital things Paul did in his ministry, he saved the best for last. Greet _____ and then we fill in 10 or 20 or 37 names of the people that Paul loved and people that loved Paul. Our relationships in Christ are the most important possession we have—just ask Paul.

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Henry Sloan Coffin concludes a 1931 sermon with this picture:
There is a very beautiful lake in the Adirondacks about which the camps have been built so that they are almost completely concealed by the forest from anyone on the water. Unless some other canoe is in sight, one paddles along with a sense of solitude amid the mountains and the woods. But when night comes, the glow of the campfires touches one with the awareness of comradeship.

The absorbing interests of our days usually claim our attention so fully that invisible presences remain unrealized. But when darkness falls, as it does in bewildering and confusing times, light gleams out for us and we become aware of the communion of the faithful in God (Henry Sloan Coffin, Christian Century Foundation, reprinted with permission from the January, 1932 issue of *The Pulpit*).

David N. Mosser, FUMC, Arlington, TX 76011