

More Than a List

Romans 16:1-16

[Note: This multiple-story sermon takes a fairly obscure passage of Scripture—a list of names in Romans 16—and uses it to affirm the centrality of relationships. A biblical model for this kind of multiple-story preaching can be found in Luke 15, where Jesus told three stories about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. The original idea for this sermon, and some of the stories, come from a sermon I heard Fred Craddock preach many years ago, “When the Roll Is Called Down Here.” Although I adapted Craddock’s ideas for my own use, the credit for this sermon must go to Craddock. The sermon, which is basically a string of stories, is based on Romans 16:1-16, which was read immediately before the sermon. There are no projection suggestions for this sermon.]

Aren't you glad you didn't have to read today's text! This passage of Scripture is nothing more than a list of names—hard to pronounce names at that. Names of people who belonged to the church in Rome during Paul's day. And reading a list of names is not very exciting. So don't feel guilty if your heart was not strangely warmed during the reading of this text. Yet, right here in Holy Scripture, the apostle Paul writes out a list of names. Just one name after another after another. Pretty boring passage. It's just a list.

But Paul would be offended if you referred to it as a mere list. You see, it was far more than a list to him. Perhaps we could better understand if we could go to Washington, DC and see the Vietnam Memorial. It's just a list of names. Block after block of names, names of people who died in Vietnam. Some people go to the memorial and see a list of names, nothing more. But for others it's much more than a list. If you went, you might see a woman put her finger on a name and then hold up a child and put the child's hand on the name. You might see another woman kiss one of the names on the wall. You might see a man wearing a military jacket find the name of an old friend and touch it and weep. You would see many flowers on the ground. Now I ask you, is the Vietnam Memorial a list of names? Yes it is. But it's much more than a list.

Romans 16 is Paul's list. These were people who helped Paul through some hard times in his life. Look at this list again. In verse 3 we read about Aquila and Priscilla. They risked their necks for Paul. In verse 5 Paul speaks of his dear friend Epenetus, his first convert in Asia. In verse 6 he tells about Mary, who works hard for the Lord. In verse 7 he lists Andronicus and Junias, who spent time in prison with Paul. In verse 9 Paul speaks of his dear friend Stachys. In verse 12 he lists Tryphena and Tryphosa, twins, women who work hard in the church. He also mentions his dear friend Persis. Look at verse 13. He lists Rufus and Rufus's mother, who was like a mother to Paul. Can you imagine a woman being a mother to the apostle Paul. Can't you just hear her say, "Now Paul, I don't care if you are an apostle, you have to eat your breakfast."

So many names on the list. But don't you see, this is more than a list to Paul. These people meant the world to him. And I think I understand something about Paul's list. You see, I have a list of my own. Years ago, when I was leaving my church in Arkansas, the church threw us a good-bye reception. And all those who came signed a guestbook. I got it out and looked at it not long ago. It's just a list of people's names.

People like Mable, the church secretary. Mable has been secretary of that church since creation. When I first came to the church, Mable asked me, "Brother Martin, how old are you?" "Twenty-five," I replied. I knew better than to ask how old she was so I asked her, "How long have you been secretary here?" "Twenty-six years," she said. Mable, my grandmother in the faith! Randall's name was also on the list. Randall our one-armed music minister. I must admit, I was reluctant to go to a church where the music minister had only one arm. But after awhile you never noticed. Randall could even tie a necktie with one hand. There were other names. Like Steve, a dentist and perhaps the best church friend I've ever had. Or Ralph, the plumber. The first week I was at the church, we had a plumbing problem. I asked somebody whom to call. "Ralph," they said. "What's his number?" "He doesn't have a phone." "Where is his office?" "He doesn't have an office." "How do you find him?" "You drive around town and look for his little blue pickup truck and ask him to come over."

Or Larry the lawyer. He always called me "preacher" so I started calling him "lawyer." Larry always said, "Preacher, feel free to let your hair down around me." Of course, I had a lot more of it to let down back then. Or Linda, only forty-two but already a widow. I buried her husband

a few months before I left the church. He died of a rare heart disorder. Lots of names on this list, but it's so much more than a list to me.

Who is on your list? Who knows you and all of your faults but loves you anyway? Or who has helped you through a hard time? A divorce, a death, a medical problem, a broken dream, or a personal failure? Do you have a list of people who are important to you. I hope so.

Tell you what. Let's do something different here. Get out a piece of paper, use your worship bulletin if you want. I want you to write a list of your own, your own Romans 16. You certainly don't have to. Nobody will know if you do or don't, and nobody but you will see it. But if you are willing, write down the name of the really important people in your life. Take a minute and write a name or two or three or five.

While you are writing, let me tell you about Carol's list. Carol was a member of a church I used to serve. Carol is a wonderful woman, full of life and joy. Carol's eighteen-year-old son was killed in a car wreck a few years ago. It's a long sad story that I don't need to tell today. But about six or eight weeks after his death, Carol brought me an article for the church newsletter. It was basically a list. She wanted to thank some people in the church for their support during that horrible time. People like Julie, who came right over and answered the phone and called all the relatives with the bad news. And Judy who stayed at Carol's house for almost a week cleaning house and cooking and keeping things going. And Charles, who came over and mowed the lawn for several months after the death.

And Jo, who also lost a son a few years earlier. Jo just came and sat and cried with Carol. She understood. "Thank you," said Carol to these people and several others. Just a list of names. Not very interesting if you were reading the church newsletter and didn't know who these people were or what they did. But to Carol it was far more than a list. It was the names of the people who helped her survive the worst nightmare of her life.

They have a name for that sort of thing back where I come from in Arkansas. They call it church family. Indeed, Carol began her list by saying, "Dear church family."

So have you finished your list? Do you have a name or two or three or five? I hope so. If not on paper then in your heart. And if you do have a list, you had better hang on to it. Don't lose

it. You may lose your money or your health or your career or your dreams, but don't lose your list. Never. Keep it forever. If you move, keep it. No matter what happens, keep the list and keep adding names to it. In fact, when your life is over and you leave this earth, take the list with you.

I know, I know, when you get to the gate Saint Peter's going to say, "Now, look, you have to understand the rules up here. You went into the world with nothing and you have to come out of it with nothing. What do you have in your hand?"

And you say, "Well, it's just a list of names." And Peter says, "Let me see it." "Well, this is just some names of folks who have helped me." "Let me see it." "Well, this is just a group of people that if it weren't for them, I'd have never made it." Peter says, "I want to see it." So you give it to him. He smiles and says, "I know all of these people. In fact, on my way here to meet you at the gate, I passed a whole group of them. They were painting a big red sign to hang over the street. It said, 'Welcome home.'"

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