

Pentecost 18 - Year A
14 September 2008
Saint Anne's Episcopal Church
Lee's Summit, Missouri

Romans 14:1-12

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love. AMEN.

As a little girl growing up in the Southern Baptist tradition, I spent a lot of time with the apostle Paul. I can remember spending months in Sunday School making a notebook on Paul's missionary journeys – mapping the course of each journey and learning about those who traveled with Paul, about those who were converted to Christianity through his preaching, and about the churches he established and guided. I can remember memorizing many verses from Paul's letters as I moved up the Girls' Auxiliary "hierarchy" from maiden to princess to queen.

Looking back, it seems as if we spent at least as much time learning about Paul as we did about Jesus. Paul was BIG. Bigger than big.

It seemed like Paul was always the main character in any story. Others traveled with him on his missionary journeys, but those like Silas and Timothy were definitely accompanying Paul. There was no question that Paul wrote every letter to which his name was attached. And, when Paul accused others of being his opponents, you knew that he was authoritatively right.

But, somehow along the way, with all the time I spent with Paul, I had missed some things about him. One of the things I had missed was the sixteenth chapter of Romans. I had to go to seminary to discover it, because I had never read it until then, and now it has become one of my favorite passages of scripture.

It is the sixteenth chapter, the chapter that closes Paul's great Letter to the Romans, that for me seems to put into real life terms what Paul wrote in today's reading from the fourteenth chapter of the Letter, as he described one very important reality of the Christian life.

We do not live to ourselves and we do not die to ourselves.

You see - somehow the picture of Paul's ministry as we see it in Romans 16 looks different than what I had seen before. Before I had thought of Paul as standing on his own, bigger than big, a robust individualist.

But in Romans 16, Paul thanked all of those who have had a part in his ministry. In this closing note of gratitude that comes near the end of his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul thanked more than twenty-five people.

Listen as I read what Paul wrote in that closing. And, before you sigh and say, "Oh my gosh – she isn't going to actually read a list of over twenty-five people, is she?" – let me ask you to bear with me a minute. Listen carefully to what Paul said about each of these individuals. Because he tells us some pretty specific things for which he is thankful.

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, 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.

Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you.

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. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our co-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 relative 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. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters 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.

These twenty-five plus names were not just a list for Paul. They were not just names. They were people who worked with him and helped him in his ministry. They were people who he couldn't have done without. They were people without whom Paul knew his ministry would not have been as fruitful as it was; perhaps he knew that without these people, he wouldn't have had any ministry at all.

A married couple who had risked their necks for him. (Don't you love that description?) A woman who was a deacon, who had been his benefactor, and who he had entrusted to carry this precious letter to the churches in Rome. Two companions who had been in prison with him. A man who was Paul's first convert in Asia; someone who had no doubt helped Paul confirm his own call as a missionary. And, a woman who had been like a mother to the great apostle. Maybe she seemed like a mother to Paul because she had brought food and a warm cloak to him when he was in prison or because she was an older, wiser woman to whom he went for counsel.

We really don't know much about these people, except what Paul tells us here. But what we do know from what Paul has written about these people is that the work of ministry – whether done by a missionary or a member of a church, a clergy person or a lay person – the work of ministry is never work done alone. No robust individualism here. However vital our own personal relationship with Christ is, however active our ministry on Christ's behalf, what we do is never unique to us, solitary, or exclusive.

To be in relationship with Christ, to minister to others in Christ's love, is to recognize that we do not live or die to ourselves. It is to recognize that we stand in solidarity and in relationship with a host of others who confess the Lordship of Christ - living and dead; past, present, and future.

And, that is why I have come to love this passage of scripture so much. Because, you see, as I read this list that Paul has given us here, I can make my own list. People who have made my life as a Christian and my ministry possible. People who have risked something for me. People who have picked me up when I have fallen. People who have worked beside me and gone before me. People who have been examples for me. People who have been like mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters to me.

Some of you know that for an hour and a half every Wednesday morning I am part of a group of pastors – an ecumenical group of Episcopalians, United Methodists, Disciples of Christ, Lutherans, Presbyterians - who gather to study the lectionary readings on which we will preach ten days later.

Well, ten days ago, we were discussing the lections for this day, and I threw out the idea of using the sixteenth chapter of Romans to “flesh out” Paul's words, “We do not live to ourselves and we do not die to ourselves.”

As I described what I might preach, one of my pastor friends said, “Have you ever read Fred Craddock’s sermon, ‘When the Roll is Called Down Here’?” I answered, “No, I haven’t,” and he replied, “Well you should find it and read it. It’s on Romans 16, and it sounds a lot like what you want to do.”

Now I am a huge fan of Fred Craddock, Professor Emeritus of Preaching and New Testament in the Candler School of Theology at Emory. So, I went and found that sermon as soon as I got back to my office.

In the sermon, Craddock invited those listening to make their own list, similar to what Paul had done in the sixteenth chapter of his Letter to the Romans. Craddock urged those listening to write down this phrase, “I thank my God for all my remembrances of you” and then to list some names that came to mind in response to that phrase.

And, he concluded with these words, which seem like the perfect ending for what I wanted to say today.

“Have you written any names? Do you have a name or two? Keep the list. Keep the list, because to you it’s not a list. In fact, the next time you move, keep that. Even if you have to leave your car and your library and your furniture and your typewriter and everything else, take that with you. In fact when your ministry is ended and you leave the earth, take it with you.

I know, 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 gotta come out of it with nothing. Now what have you got?’ And you say, ‘Well, it’s just some names.’ ‘Well, let me see it.’ ‘Well, now this is just some

names of folk I worked with and folk who helped me.’ ‘Well, let me see it.’ ‘Well, this is just a group of people that if it weren’t for them, I’d never have made it.’ He says, “I want to see it.” And he smiles and says, ‘I know all of them. In fact, on my way here to the gate I passed a group. They were painting a big, red sign to hang over the street, and it said, ‘Welcome home.’”