



Central Peninsula Church

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Romans 16:1-16
Mark Mitchell
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More Than Small Talk

SERIES: *Understanding the Church*

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well. Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; also greet the church that is in their house. Greet Epaphroditus, my beloved, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia. Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me. Greet Ampliatus,- my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and Stachys my beloved. Greet Apelles, the approved in Christ. Greet those who are of the household of Aristobulus. Greet Herodion, my kinsman. Greet those of the household of Narcissus, who are in the Lord. Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, workers in the Lord. Greet Persis the beloved, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord, also his mother and mine. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brethren with them. Greet Philologus and 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" (Romans 16:1-16).

I hope that you don't feel too guilty if your heart was not moved during the reading of God's Word. It's not very interesting, is it? It's a list, a list of greetings, a list of names, a list of strange names!

When I took a preaching class in seminary, we all had to choose a text and preach in front of the class. One of my fellow students ventured to preach on a text very much like this one. He did a great job. But when he was finished, the Professor said he had to give him a "B" instead of an "A" because the text itself was a "B." I guess you can't preach an "A" sermon from a "B" text.

This is the season for graduations. At my daughter's college graduation a few weeks ago, after the speeches and the songs, it took what seemed like an eternity to hand out the diplomas. Almost 500 names, each person proudly climbing the stairs and striding across the stage. It took so

long there were some in the crowd who left after the one they came to watch had their moment in the sun. Others, like me, had to wait. My daughter was at the end of the line. I had to wait through what for me was a lot of small talk until that one name was read.

As Paul reads out this list of names, some of us might want to get up and leave. It may be the Word of God, but if it's possible, God is engaging in some small talk here. Why, I don't even know these people. What could this have to do with me?

But if we read between the lines we might get interested in this list of names, even if no more than to ask, "I wonder why Paul felt it necessary to say hello to so many people, some of whom he had never even met?"

1. Greetings are important.

Paul uses the word "greet" 17 times here. Simple greetings were important to Paul. Throughout the Bible, greetings aren't just meaningless preliminaries, they're sacred. When the angel was sent to Mary, the first words out of his mouth were, "Greetings, favored one." Think for a minute about what life would be like without any attention given to greetings.

You're coming home from work. It's been a long day at the office. You look forward to seeing your wife or husband and kids. But as soon as you walk through the door nothing is said to acknowledge your arrival. Everybody knows you're home, but nothing changes. The same thing happens when you go to work the next morning. Nothing is said when you arrive. Work resumes where it left off the day before. There is no pausing to recognize a person's presence. In a world like this there would be no good-byes either. We would just flow in and out of one another's life, presence or absence being unacknowledged.

The hellos and good-byes of life are the punctuation for life; they bring meaning, they mark the stops and the starts and the places to pause. Without them people are never really noticed. When God's people gather together greetings are important. If our preaching and praying and singing is not punctuated with greetings, things become cold and businesslike. No one should be able to come and go from a meeting of God's people without someone acknowledging their presence.

This is not small talk. Paul acknowledges about 35

people here in all. There are around 35 names we wouldn't have otherwise known of.

2. Greetings involve real people with names.

When I was a kid I read each issue of Sports Illustrated from cover to cover. But I would always start in the back. In the back there was always a column called, "Faces in the Crowd," where five or six athletes were briefly recognized for some outstanding achievement. These are names and faces that we wouldn't ever see on TV. Sometimes the accomplishment of a small child or an elderly person was recognized. I always liked the fact that among the Pete Roses and Joe Montanas and Michael Jordans someone remembered the Bill Grubbs and the Jane Adams.

Chapter 16 is the back page column of Romans. It's Paul's "Faces in the Crowd." Most of these names are of people we might have known nothing about. We would have never known about Junias or Stachys or twin sisters named Tryphaena or Tryphosa. Names were important to Paul. It wasn't enough to just greet the whole church; he wanted to greet individuals. And so he mentions names.

The amazing thing about this is that Paul had never been to Rome when he wrote this letter. Some of these people he would have met elsewhere in his travels around Asia Minor. But many of them he probably had just heard about. And yet he still took time to recognize them. He still remembered their names.

It seems names are important. In the third letter of John he writes to an elder of the church named Gaius. At the very end of the letter he says, **"Greet the friends by name"** (3 John 1:15). What an intriguing thing to say. Perhaps John has in mind here something he quoted Jesus as saying in his gospel. Jesus says he is the Good Shepherd who **"calls his own sheep by name"** (John 10:3). Jesus calls us by name (one at a time) into his flock. What kind of salvation would it be if Christ just called en mass, with no knowledge of our name? Names are so important that the book of Revelation says that Jesus will give us **"a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it"** (Rev. 2:17).

The church is made up of people with names. We're a flock, not a herd. If we lose sight of the importance of names we miss our calling as a church. When we recognize names we're saying, "You're important. I'm glad it's YOU that's here, not someone else." When we call someone by name, it's more than just small talk.

3. Greetings allow us to express affection.

You see, these names meant something to Paul. They were his friends. Paul was no romantic, but several of these people he calls "beloved." He says, "Greet Epaenetus, my beloved. He was my first convert from Asia. I didn't sleep a wink that night, thinking, 'Is anyone listening to me?' But Epaenetus listened, and he believed. I just love that guy."

"And greet Persus. He sure worked hard. He was there when everyone else quit. He's the one who always said, 'Now Paul, you go on home. I'll put the chairs away. I'll clean up the kitchen. I'll lock up. You go on home. You're tired.'"

"But, Persus, you're tired too."

"But Paul, you have to ride a donkey across Asia tomorrow. You go on. I'll pick up here.' Greet Persus, we all love Persus."

Paul wanted his affection for them to spill over into an affection for one another. He says, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." Why did Paul have to say that? Was this just the ancient version of a handshake? No, it wasn't. It was the distinct way that Christians greeted each other. It was a way of showing their love in Christ. It broke down barriers between them - Jew and gentile, slave and free, male and female.

When I was training for the ministry, Ray Stedman brought me along with him to Brazil. He was in his sixties; I was in my early twenties. The gap between us in both age and maturity was wide. But when Ray woke up in the morning and saw me, he always gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek, and he always told me he loved me. It always made me uncomfortable, but I've never forgotten his affection. It closed the gap between us.

One scholar writes, "It betrays an unnecessary reserve, if not loss of the ardor of the church's first love, when the holy kiss is conspicuous by its absence in the Western Church."

When I look at my Christian experience over the past 30 years, I realize that every time I've seen a significant move of the Holy Spirit, it's been marked by a godly kind of affection among God's people. I met the Lord during the Jesus Movement. When I first walked into a church, the thing that struck me the most was how these people loved one another; and one of the ways that love was visible was in their affection. There was a spirit of tenderness and warmth when they met together.

When we greet one another with warm and godly affection, it's a lot more than just small talk. Those kinds of greetings are the mark of true Christian love.

4. Greetings allow us to express appreciation.

They're also a way of saying thank you. As you look through this list, you can see that Paul honors and affirms these people by recognizing the contributions they've made.

"Greet Prisca and Aquilla. They risked their own neck for me. Say hello to Andronicus and Junias, why, they've been believers longer than I have. Greet Apelles. He's been through the fire and been approved. Greet Tryphaena and

Tryphosa, those twin sisters, I never could tell them apart, except for that mole Tryphosa had on her cheek. I know their names mean 'Dainty' and 'Delicate' but they sure worked hard too. And Rufus. What a choice man! Tell him hello too, and tell his mother hello because she's been a mother to me as well."

Can't you see it? Can't you see this woman mothering Paul? I'll bet Paul stayed in her home. I picture her as a rather large woman who always wore an apron. A lot of Kleenex stuffed in the pocket of the apron. Her hair pulled back in a bun. Made a breakfast fit for a lumber jack.

Paul said, "I'm sorry. I can't stay. I have to get on the road."

"Sit down and eat your breakfast and wait while I pack you a lunch. I don't care if you're an apostle. You've got to eat."

"Rufus, tell OUR mother hello."

You see, Paul knew that ministry was hard work. People get wounded and tired and need encouragement and affirmation. Paul refused to take people's hard work for granted. Sometimes our attitude is, "Well, they're doing it for the Lord, aren't they? Why should I thank them? Why should I affirm them? Don't they get that from God? Why should they need that from me?" Paul would answer, "Yes, they are doing it for the Lord. And yes, he will affirm them. And one of the ways he's going to do that is through ME!" When we serve, our eyes should be on the Lord, but often he affirms through others. And there's a domino effect to affirmation - when we affirm people we in turn set them free from their self-doubt to affirm others.

This is more than just small talk. When we greet one another like this, all of a sudden we've got a church full of people affirming and appreciating each other. People feel freed from the chains of insignificance; they feel God is using them; that they're part in the body is crucial to the whole.

5. Greetings allow us to remember those easily forgotten.

Apart from greetings like this, a lot of us would be forgotten.

A number of these names are names of common slaves. Julia and Philologus were names given to slaves in Paul's day. Paul greets them right along side men like Aristobulus, a leading member of the royal household. And many of these names are of women. In a day when women were subjected to significant discrimination, Paul recognizes them right along side of men. Scholars argue about the proper role of women in the church. I like what F.F. Bruce says about this passage, "Whatever these women were doing, it was more than just serving tea!" These women were ministering right along side of men. One of them he calls a

"deacon" and another he even calls an "apostle."

There are people in every church who are easily forgotten; who easily fall between the cracks of church life. In a church with a predominance of young families, it might be singles, single parents, or even couples that don't have children. In a church where most people are upper middle class white collar types, it might be those who don't fit that profile. And because of that, we need to go out of our way to remember them.

Maybe that's why Jesus said, **When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and repayment come to you. But, when you give a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, and you will be blessed**" (Luke 14:12-14).

How easy it is to socialize with our own kind, people who have the ability to offer us something in return. Most of us feel we barely have time to cultivate the friendships we have, much less seek out new ones outside of our normal circle. But, as long as we do that we look just like the world does, and people who don't fit our mold quietly slip away and find some place where they feel like they fit.

When you greet one another, remember those who are easily forgotten.

6. Greetings are important because we may not see each other again on earth.

Don't call it small talk. It's not small talk.

In fact, these greetings in Romans 16 are, for Paul, extremely significant because even though he was saying "hello," he was also saying "goodbye." In chapter 15 he tells them that he is planning to visit them in Rome on his way to Spain. That's always been his desire - to go to Spain to preach the gospel, but to pass through Rome on the way. He says he hoped they can help him out on his way, and he looks forward to just enjoying their company a little bit (15:22-24). But before he heads for Rome he needs to go to Jerusalem. He's been collecting money from Gentile churches to take as an offering for the poor in Jerusalem. For Paul going to Jerusalem was like walking into a hornet's nest. That's why at the end of chapter 15 he asks them to "Strive together with me in your prayers." Why? "So that I won't be eaten alive in Jerusalem. I really do want to see you guys in Rome" (15:30-32). Sometimes when we say hello we wonder if we're really saying goodbye.

I think of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. A sea of black marble stretched out beneath the Washington Mall. A long list of names. Some walk by and look at it like it's just that, a list of names. Others go closer. Some walk slowly up and down the column. A woman walks up and puts her finger on a name. She holds a child up and places the child's hand on that name. Another woman kisses the wall

where a name is inscribed.

It's more than just a list of names. More than just small talk.

Would you take a pen or pencil and write down a name? Write down a name of someone you want to greet. Write down their name. Someone you care about. Someone beloved in the Lord. Someone who worked hard. Someone the world might forget. Write down their name. Then write another name and another.

When I was just 24 I went to serve as youth pastor in a little church in Pleasanton. Lynn and I arrived there with a 4-month-old daughter about as wet behind the ears as a ministry couple could ever be. We served there for almost four years before we packed our bags and went off to Seminary in Denver. And then a couple of years later we packed our bags again and came here to Foster City. And every time we moved we would sit down among the boxes and look at the pictures and remember all the names.

"Look, there's George Mackin. Remember he helped us put that sprinkler system in.

"Look, there's Mike and Mary Alice Deboar. They invited us into their small group. We were so lonely...until we met them.

"Look, there's Bill Fleck. Remember how he served on our Jr. High ministry team. He would show up at our house every Friday night, just around dinner time.

"Look, there's Barb Welsh. She taught Anne-Marie's Sunday School class.

"Look, there's John Thompson in his wheelchair. Remember how we carried John through the snow on our Winter Retreat? Remember how he used to make us laugh? John's with Jesus now. I sure miss him."

On and on it goes. Sometimes we would look at each and say, "Remember how close we were with those people? It doesn't get any better than that."

In every community we've been, there's been a name for that. I've heard it used in other communities as well. The name for that is "church." We call that "church."

7. When we get to heaven, we will greet one another.

Have you written down any names? Maybe two or three or four? Keep those names. In fact, the next time you move, keep those names with you. Even if you have to leave your car, or your furniture, or your computer, take those names with you. In fact, when your life and ministry has ended and you leave this earth, take those names and greetings with you.

I know, I know. You can't take them with you. When you get to the gates of heaven, the Lord will say, "You went into this world empty-handed, you come out of it empty-handed as well. What do you have in your hand?"

"Well, it's just some names; some greetings."
"Can I see it?"

"Well, these are just the people I worked with; folks who helped me out along the way."

"Let me see it."

"You see, it's just that I don't think I would have made it without them."

"I know. So let me see the names."

Finally, you give it to him, and when he reads the names he smiles. "I know all of these people. In fact, on my way here to meet you I passed them. They were painting a great big sign to hang over the street just for you. It said, 'Greetings... We're glad you've come home.'"

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