

As you might imagine, I'm feeling a bit nostalgic today, so I want to start with a story that took place about 35 years ago. I was a young seminary student in Denver, and I was invited by the CPC's elders to come out to the Bay Area and interview for a position at CPC. My responsibilities would mainly be to oversee our Community Group ministry, so after meeting with the elders, Lynn and I met with all the Community Group leaders. I was asked to give a teaching, which would be part of how they'd decide if I was a good fit for the job and the church. By the way, based on a couple of my sermons they'd heard, they told me they didn't see me playing much of a role in the preaching ministry at CPC. They just weren't convinced that was one of my gifts, and I was okay with that.

So Lynn and I met all the Community Group leaders and their spouses; about 35 of us bunched together in Jeff Farrar's family room. It was in that meeting that I felt God confirm my calling to CPC. I taught from one of my favorite passages. It's found in the very back page of Paul's letter to the Romans. I've always liked the back page of letters and magazines the best. As a kid growing up, I subscribed to Sports Illustrated and always turned to the back page first because there was a segment there called "Faces in the Crowd." It ran from 1956-2006, and it featured a handful of amateur athletes with a photo and a short blurb of their accomplishments. Through the years, over 15,000 athletes and their accomplishments were recognized. These were people no one would have ever known about if they hadn't been written about on that page.

I think that's why I keep coming back to Romans 16. In this last part of his letter, Paul recognizes the faces in the crowd; those individual people who mattered so much to him in his life and ministry. When I think of 34 years at CPC, that's what I think about; I think about the people; I think about the faces. Turn to your Bibles and read Romans 16:1-16.

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me. Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province

of Asia. Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.

Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. Greet Apelles, whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test. Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew. Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the other brothers and sisters with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the Lord's people who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

I hope you don't feel too guilty if your heart wasn't 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, some very strange names! This is a passage of scripture so ordinary and mundane that's its often overlooked.

It's like a graduation ceremony. After the speeches and the songs, they pass out the diplomas, calling every single graduate's name—one by one. I was there at each one of my kids' graduations. Being a "Mitchell" meant there were a good number of names that came before theirs. We'd wait through what was for us a long list of nobodies until that one name was read that was a somebody to us.

As Paul reads out this list of names, it might seem to us like a bunch of nobodies. Some of us might want to check out. Who are these people? What do they have to do with me? But, again, sitting here today, reflecting on 34 years of ministry at CPC, I think about names like these. I think about the people; the faces in the crowd. I think of the people I've had the privilege of meeting and working with over the years, many of whom invited Lynn and me into some of the most important moments of their lives. I think about the little things that define them. Not the big things seen by many, but the little things; the in-between things; maybe it's a note; maybe it's a meal; maybe it's a handshake or a

hug. It's those things that define us as people who genuinely care for others. It's almost like you have to read between the lines in a list of names like this. As we do that, we should ask ourselves, "What does this teach us about our life together as God's people? What really matters?"

Greetings are important to our life together

Notice Paul uses the word "greet" 17 times here. Simple greetings mattered 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." Greetings are important in our life together.

Think of what life would be like without any greetings? You're coming home from work. It's been a long day. You look forward to seeing your family. 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's no pausing to recognize your presence. In a world like this, there'd be no good-byes either. We'd just flow in and out of one another's life, our presence or absence being unacknowledged.

I think about this in a marriage. When a husband or a wife goes off to work in the morning, how important it is to pause and look into each other's eyes and say, "I love you. I hope your day is good." And when you meet again, pause, give each other kiss and welcome each other's presence.

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

Paul greets about 30 people here in all, each one by name. Here are 30 names we wouldn't have otherwise known of.

Our life together is with real people with names

It reminds us that our life together is with real people with names. I get called a lot of things. Most people just call me Mark. A few people call me Pastor. Some even call me Dr. Mitchell. But those people who've known me the longest always call me Mitch. That's my nickname. When someone calls me Mitch, I know they know me well, and I always perk up. Several years ago, I finished a sermon and heard someone call out, "Mitch." We went to High School together. I hadn't seen that man for 20 years, but I immediately knew who it was.

I wonder how many of these names were nicknames Paul used affectionately. I'm sure some of them he knew quite well; others

perhaps he'd never met. But most of these names are of people we might have known nothing about if they weren't on this list. We'd 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, so he mentions names.

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 1:14). What an intriguing thing to say. Perhaps John has in mind here something Jesus said, "...*He calls his own sheep by name...*" (John 10:3). Jesus calls us by name (personally, one at a time) into his flock. What kind of salvation would it be if Jesus just called us en masse, with no knowledge of our name? Names are so important that the book of Revelation says one day Jesus will give us "...*a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it*" (Rev. 2:17).

When I first came to CPC, we were a church of about 350 people meeting over at Bowditch Middle School. Lynn and I arrived here with a five-year-old daughter and another one due to arrive any day. We were about as wet behind the ears as a ministry couple could ever be. We thought we'd only stay a couple of years and then move on to bigger and better things. But through the years, each time we thought about leaving, we couldn't do it, and we stayed. I think a lot of the reason we stayed is because of the people; people with names.

The church is made up of people with names. We're a flock, not a herd. If we lose sight of the importance of people with 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."

Expressions of affection are important in our life together

You see, these names meant something to Paul. These were his friends. Paul was no romantic, but several of these people he calls "dear friend" or as another translation puts it, "my beloved." This was an expression of affection. These are important in our life together. In verse 5, he says, "*Greet my dear friend Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.*" You almost have to read between the lines. I imagine Paul thinking, "I didn't sleep a wink that night. I wondered if anyone was even listening to me. But Epaenetus listened, and he believed. I just love that guy."

Paul wanted his affection for them to spill over into an affection for one another. So he says, "*Greet one another with a holy kiss.*" Why did he have to say that? He certainly didn't know about COVID-19! But this was the distinct way 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 made me a little uncomfortable, but I've never forgotten his affection. It closed the gap between us. To be honest, physical affection doesn't always come naturally to me, but I so appreciate the people who get past that and give me a hug or even a holy kiss.

When I look back at my Christian experience, I see every time I've seen a significant move of the Holy Spirit; it's been marked by a warm affection among God's people. I met the Lord during the Jesus Movement. When I walked into an evangelical church for the first time in my life, the thing that struck me the most was how these people loved one another; and one of the ways that was seen was in their affection. There should be a spirit of tenderness and warmth when we meet together.

You know that time in the service when we greet one another? Perhaps it's uncomfortable for you, but it might be one of the most significant times in the service. When we greet one another with warm and godly affection, it's a lot more than just small talk. Those greetings are the mark of true Christian love.

Expressing appreciation is important in our life together

It's also important to express appreciation. As you look through this list, you see Paul honors and affirms these people by recognizing their contributions.

"Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house" (vv. 3-5). This godly couple had been with Paul on many of his travels. Like Paul, they were tentmakers, and here we see that they often opened their home as a place for the church to meet.

"Greet Apelles, whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test" (v. 10a). We don't know he went through, but he passed through the fire and was faithful.

"Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord" (v. 12a). These were most likely twin sisters. Their names mean 'Dainty' and 'Delicate' but they sure worked hard.

"Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too" (v. 13). Can't you see this woman mothering Paul? I'll bet Paul stayed in her home. I'll bet he wanted to hit the road early, but she made him sit down and stay for breakfast. Paul remembered that, and he says, "Rufus, tell your mother hello. She was a mother to me as well."

I lost my mother when I was 33. That's why I'm so thankful for the mothers I've had here at CPC. One name I think of is Gladys. She always called me Dr. Mitchell. She'd send Lynn and I off to pastor's conferences so we could be around teachers she wanted us to emulate. She'd say, "Do you know Dr. Sproul? I'd like to send you and Lynn to Dr. Sproul's conference." I'm pretty sure Gladys was trying to get my theology straightened out, but we went, and we still miss Gladys!

Then Paul says, *"Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord" (v. 12b).* It's like she was there when everyone else quit. She'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, Paul. You're tired."

Paul appreciated people like this, and he told them that. He knew 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?"

Paul would answer, "Yes, they're doing it for the Lord. And yes, he'll affirm them. But one of the ways he's going to do that is through you!" When we serve, our eyes should be on the Lord, but often he affirms us 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. 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 their part in the body is crucial to the whole.

I think of the men and women in this church who've set up chairs, folded bulletins, made coffee, served as ushers and greeters, worked in the tech booth or the parking lot, and faithfully written checks from their hard-earned money. I haven't said it enough—thank you. Thank you for serving. I can't thank you enough. This church, and I myself, would be nothing without you.

In our life together, we should 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 alongside men like Aristobulus, a leading member of the royal household. It seems that in the body of Christ, status in the world means nothing. In our life together, we should remember those easily forgotten

And many of these names are of women. In a day when women were subjected to significant discrimination, Paul recognizes them right alongside men. Phoebe is called a servant. This is the Greek word otherwise translated "deacon" or a "minister." Junia is called an apostle. Jesus chose twelve Apostles and gave them

a unique authority, but there were others who were apostles in a different sense. That word apostle literally means “sent one.” I like what F.F. Bruce said about this passage, “Whatever these women were doing, it was more than serving tea!” These women were ministering right alongside men.

There are people in every church who are easily forgotten, who fall between the cracks of church life. In a church with a predominance of young families, it might be the unmarried, single parents, widows, or even couples who don't have children. And because of that, we need to go out of our way to remember them.

How easy it is to socialize with our own kind, people who can offer us something in return. Most of us feel we barely have time to cultivate the friendships we have, much less seek 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 finding someplace else where they do fit. In our life together, we should remember those who are easily forgotten.

In our life together, remember we may not see each other again

These greetings in Romans 16 are, for Paul, extremely significant because he didn't really know for sure if he'd ever had a chance to greet them again. In chapter 15, he tells them he's planning to visit them in Rome on his way to Spain. He says he hopes they can help him out on his way, and he looks forward to enjoying their company.

But before he heads for Rome, he needs to go to Jerusalem. For Paul going to Jerusalem was like walking into a hornet's nest. There were people there who wanted him dead. That's why at the end of chapter 15, he says, “...join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea” (Rom. 15:30-31). In other words, “I really do want to see you guys in Rome, but it's not a slam dunk. I need your prayers. There are people who want my head.”

In our life together, we should always remember we may not see each other again. There should always be this sense among us that our lives are fragile. We can't take anything for granted. I said earlier much of the reason we stayed here at CPC is the people with names. And through the years, some of those people's names have become a memory. They've gone on to glory. Sometimes Lynn and I look at each and say, “Remember Mike?” or “Remember Gladys?” or “Remember Steve?” or “Remember Donna?” or “Remember Bill.” On and on the list goes. There's

a name for that. The name for that is “Church.” In Christian theology, the church is traditionally divided into two different categories: The Church Militant, which comprises Christians on earth who are living, who struggle against sin and the devil. You and I here today are part of the Church Militant. But there's another category we often forget about. It's called the Church Triumphant, comprising of those who are in Heaven.

Although these two groups may be physically separated from each other by the barrier of death, we nonetheless remain united to each other in one Church. We call this the Communion of Saints.

Think of these words: “I thank my God for all my remembrance of you.” Some of those people we remember are gone from this planet. We remember them, too. If you keep a list of names, keep them on the list and hold onto it. I know we like to say, “You can't take it with you.” But I can imagine getting to heaven with that list of names. I can imagine looking a few of those people up. I can imagine seeing them for the first time and saying, “I thank my God every time I remember you.”

So, I hope you can see why this list of names means so much to me, especially now. In my letter this week, I said that besides my salvation and my family, CPC is the greatest blessing I've ever experienced in my life. And that is because of the people; people with names. I pray that this next year will be a year of adding to that list of names. And I pray that the names of those already on the list know how much we need them and how much they mean to us.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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