

ROLL CALLING

Romans 16

(based on and borrowed from a sermon by Fred Craddock)

**Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
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Heroes of the faith. We're all familiar with Goliath and Gideon. But have you ever heard of Tryphaena and Tryphosa? No less heroes of the faith to the Apostle Paul.

Read the text: Romans 16:1-16

I hope you won't feel too ashamed if your heart was not all aflutter during the reading of the text. It's not very interesting. It's a list. A list of names, a list of strange names to our ears. Famed homiletics professor Fred Craddock teaches his preaching students that when you're preaching from the Biblical text, avoid the lists. At all costs, avoid the lists, because the lists are deadly. But, Craddock offers an interesting take on this list in Romans 16.

Paul is calling the roll.

Paul's roll calling is interesting, if for no other fact, than for the reason that he'd never been to the church. How did he know all of these names? Well, he is trying to raise money for his upcoming mission trip to Spain. Do you think you could buy mailing lists back then?

The list does give us something of a sociological profile of the early church. There is a husband and wife, Aquila and Priscilla. A son and his mother, Rufus and his mother. A brother and his sister — Nereus and his sister. A pair of brothers is in the list — Andronicus and Junias. A pair of sisters — Tryphaena and Tryphosa. There's an old man — Epaenetus. There is a single woman — Mary. There's a single man — Herodion.

Really, there's not a lot of nuclear family in the text at all, except as Christ has called them together to be a family.

It's an interesting list — well, not very, but kind of. But for Paul, it's not a list. He's in the home of Gaius in Corinth. Gaius is both Paul's host and the host of the church in Corinth. Paul is preparing to go west to Rome, and then to Spain. Paul, himself, is in his late 50's or early 60's. He is about to go to a new work, a new mission field.

Paul got a late start in ministry — about the age of 35 — and, so, he wants to have at least one other mission opportunity. Paul is packing his things: a cloak and some books, parchments. He is trying to trim down the load so that it won't be so very heavy. Perhaps, as he is cleaning, he comes across some notes, some correspondence. He sits down among the boxes and he begins to remember.

For Paul, it's not a list (as Fred Craddock says). It's remembering.

We need to remember our family of faith, our brothers and sisters in Christ.

That's what you do when you think about church, about Christian friends. You remember.

At the very first congregation which I served, Garner Baptist Church in Garner, Texas, as a minister of youth, we had a Sunday School attendance of 40 – in the whole church. (Well, we started with eight; 40 seemed pretty good.) There were Ronnie and Susan, who would always fix a good meal on Sunday afternoon when you were invited. And if you didn't leave too quickly, they would get out the home movies of their children when they were small. You know – the type of films that only a mom and dad can enjoy. Or, perhaps, only a mother. And then there were Robert and Polly. Robert who, in the middle of the preacher's sermon, would, without hesitation or hold back, yawn the loudest yawn to a rhythmic tune of boredom. "Y-a-w-n- huh huh huh huh," he would say, as he stretched out his arm around Polly. I would tease the minister every Sunday after this occurred. We all knew it was coming. It was just a matter of when.

Somehow, we all loved each other with such a powerful force that the hour's drive to church and the hour's drive home from church to the city of Fort Worth seemed well worth our while, because we were going to be with our church family.

At Meadowbrook Baptist, in Robinson, Texas, the list is too long to cover, but I can certainly mention a few. There was Ken, the chairman of the pastor search committee, who was so nervous about hiring a young man who had never pastored before (me) to come and fill the slot left by a wise veteran. There was Robert, who talked very little but was always the backbone of the church, giving sacrificially above and beyond what anyone else could possibly expect him to do. There was Fran, who volunteered for everything, although she had no more time than anyone else but always seemed to be able to get it done and get it done in good measure. A saint, in this pastor's mind. There was Ray and Darlene, who always stayed after the function was over to help the pastor and the janitor put up all the chairs and tables, turn out the lights and lock the doors. There was George, confined to a wheelchair, limited physically, but mentally well above my game – a retired college professor that I knew was smarter than his pastor was, and I think, perhaps, he knew it as well. Nonetheless, always encouraging, always supporting, always helping me lead the people to cross new frontiers and new ways of ministry. Then there were David and Dana – (I've changed their names, just to be safe) – a couple who was living together and simply visiting about once a month when I first came. Four years later they were married and served as leaders in the church. He led the men's ministry and she taught Sunday School. People who allowed the story of Jesus to transform their personal lives and make them a part of a church family.

Remembering.

Paul begins by remembering Phoebe, a deaconess, a servant of the church. Then Priscilla and Aquila, a devout Christian couple who were able to instruct Apollas in the faith. A couple who had the church meet in their house, in more places than one. Paul remembers them because they "risked their lives" for him. Paul was thankful, as were as all the churches of the Gentiles.

Apparently what they had done was well known. Was it the occasion when Paul was in great danger in Ephesus? As a part of the list, says Paul, “Aquila and Priscilla risked their necks for me.”

And next on the list: Andronicus and Junias. “Hey, we were in jail together,” Paul remembers. What great people. Then there’s Mary (verse 6) who always worked when everybody quit. Who said, “Paul, you go ahead and go home, because I’ll put the hymnals away. You must be tired from teaching today.” “Well, you’re tired, too, Mary,” Paul countered. “I know. But you have to ride a donkey across Asia tomorrow. Now, go on.” Mary – she worked hard.

It’s not a list. It’s remembering.

“Epaenetus, the first one to respond to my preaching.” The first one down the aisle, we might say, for Paul. I remember the first one down the aisle when I preached. I’ll never forget her. “Finally,” Paul must have thought, “someone is responding to my message of Messiah, Jesus.” Epaenetus, the first convert for Paul.

Paul remembered. The twins – Tryphaena and Tryphosa, whose names are probably best translated “delicate” and “dainty.” Don’t you remember? “They always sat on this side of the church, both wearing blue. Never knew which one was which. One had a mole, but I can’t remember whether it was Tryphaena or Tryphosa who had the mole. Nonetheless, they were always faithful,” Paul remembers.

Then there is Rufus, who Paul remembers as a choice man of the Lord. And Rufus’s mother, “who has also been a mother to me,” Paul says. Can’t you see her now? Large woman with an apron, hair pulled back in a bun, fixing the best of breakfasts. “I don’t have time to eat,” Paul said. “I have to run.” “Sit down and eat your breakfast,” she said. “Apostle or not, you have to eat your breakfast.” Tell my mother hello, Paul says.

This is not a list for Paul. It’s remembering – remembering of family, for Paul.

Fred Craddock recalls when “The List of Names” was brought to Atlanta. Workers set it up in the public place. Block after block, forming a long wall of names. Vietnam names. Some passersby only saw it a list of names. But there were others – others went over it closely, some walking slowly down the columns. A woman who walks up to place her finger on a particular name. Then, holding up a child, she placed the child’s hand on a name. And yet another woman, over there, who kisses the wall at a particular name. Flowers lying beneath the wall. Or here, a man makes a pencil etching of the name dear to his heart. Don’t call it a list. To these people, it’s not a list. It’s remembering.

While Paul addresses these people, saying: “Say hello to...” “Say hello to...” “Say hello to...” Paul is really bidding them good-bye. Paul knows that before he goes to Rome, he is going to Jerusalem. He doesn’t know what awaits him there. Will the Jews accept him? He is very tentative about what awaits him. Will it be bondage? Will it be death? He is approaching, with a Gentile offering, a nest of hostility for both him and his ministry to the Gentiles. He asks them in Chapter 15 to pray for him, to agonize with him, that he would not be killed in Jerusalem.

Look at 15:30-33: “Strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, that I may be delivered from those who are disobedient in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints; so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshing rest in your company.”

Paul was nervous. Paul was not really saying hello. Paul was giving the possible good-bye.

As imperfect as the church is, just the same, I don't suppose that there is anything like it in all of the world. Nothing like it anywhere. Nothing like belonging to a church family. Having a church of your own. Saying like those in Romans 16 could say, “I belong to the church at Rome.” Saying, “I belong at First Baptist Church” or Piney Grove Baptist Church or Meadowbrook Baptist Church or Fillmore Methodist Church. Nothing like it in all the world.

To say that there is a group of people – a group of people who, with me, proclaim the Messiahship of Jesus, both His death and, yes, His resurrection, ascension and anticipate His coming again. For us. People of one mind and one heart who sing praises together to God, study His Word, work, worry and worship together.

To be part of the people of God.

I don't care how imperfect the church is – and you and I both know she has her faults – Paul saw the church as nothing less than the people of God. The new Israel. The Body of Christ. The Bride of Christ. The *ecclesia*. Those, like Israel of the Old Testament, who are called out to stand and listen to “Thus sayeth the Lord.” Those who, in New Testament language, have built their own lives, their own family around the story of Christ: a story of a virgin birth, a perfect life, a sacrificial death, a resurrection, an ascension and a glorious return of the Resurrected One – belong to a church.

From time to time I'll come across someone who, after visiting our church, says something simply like this. “I sure enjoyed worshiping with you today. But we like just to visit around different churches and hear different perspectives and hear different pastors, to hear different types of music, to praise God in different ways and different places.” The indication is, “We just happened to be passing through your church today.” And I feel sorry for them. Who are they running from? That's certainly not to say that people should never change churches. There comes a time in the life of a family when they are called to change churches. That occasional, prayerful change is certainly a part of what it means to be honestly and sincerely seeking a family of faith in which to belong. But, the idea of the transient with no home and no place to go is simply foreign to the New Testament. It's being with the same people, serving side by side, agreeing and disagreeing, loving and hurting, disappointing and being disappointed, being fed and feeding, having your feet washed and washing another's, serving and being served – all part of what it means to be with God's people.

A sense of belonging.

How do you belong? How do you get that sense of “this is my place”? I can tell you one thing, for sure. It will never come by simply sitting back and wanting others to cater to you. Don’t feel like you belong at First Baptist Church or whatever church it is that you’re in the process of choosing to be your church family? You’ll feel like you belong when you serve.

You sense that in this list in Romans 16. Phoebe, a deaconess/servant of the church. Priscilla and Aquila, who served, risked their own necks for the Apostle Paul. Mary, who was the worker, the one who served. Andronicus and Junias who were there, side by side, with Paul in prison. Rufus’s mother, whose own love and service to Paul made him feel like she was also his own mother. And there again, “delicate and dainty” – Tryphaena and Tryphosa. What are they called? Workers in the Lord.

You belong when you say, “Scoot over and give me an oar. I want to help row the boat.” When you give financially. When you serve. When you decide to hurt with those who are hurting. When you let the loss of another be your own loss. When you let the joy of another be your own joy. There is nothing like it, I promise you, in all the world.

The church is a body of like-minded believers gathered around a man who died on a cross and rose again, proclaiming together that Jesus is Lord. And we are His. Willing to submit to each other. Willing to submit to the authority of the scripture. Willing to change our lives to let the path on which we tread be determined by the moral demands of the New Testament and its community, the church. Willing to give our time, talents, efforts and energies to hold the banner high for God’s kingdom and God’s people. Willing to study week after week and hour after hour this book, which we determined to be different from all other books.

The church. The church is different because Christ is different. The church is different because it’s not based on a common interest in a hobby or in an athletic agenda or based around a love for humanity. Rather, it’s based on the love of God for humanity found in the gift of His Son, Messiah Jesus.

It was at a Ranger’s baseball game. A small airplane circled the ball park towing a banner which read, “ATTEND THE CHURCH OF YOUR CHOICE TODAY.” Not your typical airplane-hoisted advertisement. In fact, in some ways (some spectators said) it looked completely out of place amid the other orbiting air ads. Other airplanes dragged invitations to saloons and taverns, luring the leering to topless bars with offers of discounts off alcohol and cover charges after the game.

But this lone ranger of an airplane offered no such discounts (for instance, the banner did not offer a reduction in biblical challenges regarding Christian life – just imagine a church advertising “NO TITHING FOR THE FIRST HUNDRED VISITORS!” or “TEN COMMANDMENTS REDUCED TO THREE, TODAY ONLY! No, this offer simply reminded the fans to stay faithful to their church or find one right away to which they could be faithful.

“A church,” some of the drunken spectators must have thought. “Why be faithful to the church?” Perhaps, as with baseball teams, the church’s fans had been discouraged in times

past because they had seen pettiness or greed, or rules violations among the professionals – the pastors. Perhaps some fans stayed away from the church because they perceived it was too full of losers, or because the game moved too slow (wanting more pizzazz in worship).

But some, not many, maybe a few, were reminded from the sky that worship and service to God is their highest loyalty. That the final error, the ultimate strike-out, would be to fail in the run toward our true home. The church does not need fans; she seeks players. The church does not offer reductions in challenges, but an invitation to the greatest team God has assembled. Here “everybody is somebody” and everybody has something to do which is really worth doing. The prize, of course, it not a pennant nor a World Series ring, but a crown which we will have the privilege of casting at the feet of Jesus Christ. This is big league stuff, to be sure.

“ATTEND THE CHURCH OF YOUR CHOICE,” the banner shouted from the sky. I choose First Baptist Church of Amarillo. What about you?

A church where we remember the names of those who loved us and cared for us and the Gospel of Christ Jesus.

In your area for sermon notes there, would you take a pen and write – or any piece of paper will do – just in the margin write, “I thank my God for all my remembrance of you.” Sounds like Paul, doesn’t it? Maybe you want to write it in your own language, in more modern English. “I thank God when I remember you.”

Now, write a name. You choose the name. Remember the name. Somebody at this church, a previous church, who meant a whole lot to you. Jot their name down. Got it? Now, write another name. Like Paul, write a third name, even a fourth one. Write another name.

Remembering the names. Aquila. Priscilla. Mary. You heard the whole list. Twenty-four names in all. I bet you’ve got names, too – names you remember. Have a roll call of those in your church family. It’s an old-time favorite,

“When the roll is called up yonder,
When the roll is called up yonder,
When the roll is called up yonder,
When the roll is called up yonder, I’ll be there.”

Yes, to be sure, there’s biblical imagery of a heavenly book that has the citizenship of the residents of the kingdom of God listed. There is a roll call, so to speak, indeed, up yonder. But Paul gives us another kind of roll call, one that seems closely related. “When the roll,” we might say, “when the roll is called down yonder, when the roll is called at church, you can count on me – I’ll be there.”