

A Galaxy of Unsung Heroes and Heroines

Romans 16:1-16

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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How does one say thank you for two marvelous years with this marvelous congregation? How does one show gratitude for a thousand kindnesses to a pair of aliens from Arizona? Carol and I have been engaged in some form of ministry since 1955, for forty-nine years. And these two years have been the icing on our pastoral cake. We have served in wonderful churches, but I can tell you that you are the most hospitable and welcoming of them all. So how does one say thanks? And how does one honor the hundreds of unsung heroes and heroines who serve their Savior quietly and consistently through the ministries of this church? Paul, in this note at the end of Romans, thanks twenty-seven people by name. I will not mention any names today for fear of omitting many who deserve our thanks and the Lord's commendation. Instead, I will focus on three characteristics that, in my opinion, you share with Paul's co-workers.

Note first the RICH DIVERSITY in Romans 16. There are men and women, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free in this gallery of unsung heroes and heroines. For example, there are nine women here, and none of the nine were sitting in the corner quietly doing their knitting. The very first name in the list is a woman, Phoebe, a deacon in the church at Cenchreae. Paul commands the Romans to "help her in whatever she may require." The word "require" suggests that Phoebe is a woman of authority. She is a leader, just as many women in this congregation are leaders. Those who claim that women should not assume leadership in the church should ponder the fact that Junia, the fourth woman named, is called an "apostle." In the first century church, "apostle" is the highest office anyone could occupy, and Junia, a woman, is an apostle. So not only is there gender diversity here, but the women are highly respected as leaders in the church.

And there is social diversity here. Thirteen of these names appear in documents connected with the imperial household in Rome. Others, like Ampliatus, are slave names. But just because they were slaves in society didn't doom them to slavery in the church. Far from it! In one of the Roman catacombs there is a decorated tomb with the name "Ampliatus" carved in bold, decorative letters. Only influential leaders were honored with such tombs, and Ampliatus, a slave, held such an honored position. So, from the earliest days, there was social diversity in the Christian church, yet social rank counted for little when the church chose its leaders.

When I arrive here two years ago I imagined that this church must be filled with nationally prominent people. And there are some who fall into that category, but not nearly as many as I imagined. You represent a broad social spectrum, from senators and members of congress to students burning the midnight oil, from highly-paid executives to retirees struggling to make ends meet. I've heard members say, "You know, I've worked beside so-and-so for several years, and never knew that she was a partner in a major law firm, or the CEO of a multinational corporation, or a leading figure in a government agency. All I knew was that she was a disciple of Jesus Christ." That tells me that when you choose church leaders you look at faith, not at Forbes, and you call people into service based not on their net worth but on their spiritual gifts. Keep it up, for, as Paul says elsewhere, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28)

The second thing that impresses me about this gallery of unsung heroes and heroines is their SPIRITED CAMARADERIE. They supported each other, cared for each other, prayed for each other, and at times defended each other when they were arrested and thrown in prison. These people joyfully worked side by side in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ.

Almost every Bible I've ever owned has a map in the back, labeled "Paul's Missionary Journeys," as though Paul single-handedly spread Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. But while preparing this sermon I scanned Paul's letters and wrote down the names of his co-workers; I gave up after listing sixty-four of them. Paul was no Lone Ranger; he was one of many who worked in concert to spread the Gospel. Phoebe, he writes, "has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well." Then he commends Prisca and Aquila "who work with me and risked their necks for my life." Urbanus was his "co-worker," and Rufus' mother was "a mother to me also." There was camaraderie in the early church, a wide network of colleagues who collaborated in getting the Gospel of Jesus Christ out to the ends of the earth.

Earlier this summer I watched that same camaraderie among our Vacation Bible School leaders. They had such a good time teaching and playing with your children. I feel a spirited camaraderie in our board meetings. No, your officers don't agree on every issue, but when the vote is taken they move on as one. Teenagers will testify to the camaraderie they experience on their mission trips. The Sunday Evening Club has been together for almost fifty-seven years because of the strong affection they feel for one another. Countless volunteers serve on this church's committees and work in harmony to achieve its goals.

And speaking of working together, let me issue a mild warning. When Gareth Icenogle arrives next week you may be tempted to cut back on your involvement in the church. You'll be tempted to say, Let Gareth shape the vision and set the future agenda. Let Gareth do the teaching and care for the congregation. Let Gareth evangelize the unchurched and interact with the wider community. But Gareth can't do it by himself, any more than Paul could do it by himself. So, rather than folding your arms, open your hands. Give yourselves to one another and to your new pastor with spirited camaraderie.

Finally, I call your attention to the UNDERLYING EMPOWERMENT in this first century church. Paul mentions Jesus Christ six times in this text, and refers to him as "the Lord" another half dozen times. Jesus Christ is woven in and through these twenty-seven names like the wires that run from the power station next door to the flood lights in this sanctuary. You and I see the light, we don't see the underground conduits that carry the power. But they are there, and without them we would be worshiping in darkness today. What these twenty-seven men and women started so long ago would long since have faded into darkness were it not for the

underlying empowerment of Jesus Christ.

Stay connected to Jesus Christ. Do not let personal intrigues or smoldering jealousies or arrogant pride disrupt the power grid. Let there be no blackouts at The National Presbyterian Church, and there won't be so long as you remain connected to Jesus Christ as Lord.

I ran into Derric Johnson while on vacation last month. He was in San Diego for the fiftieth anniversary of a church he once served. He talked them into making it a two week celebration. On the first weekend they would focus on the past; on the second, they would focus on the future. The theme for the first weekend was, "Hats off to the past." The theme for the second was, "Coats off to the future."

You have a great legacy here at NPC. For over two hundred years you've had great leadership, great music, great facilities, a great history. And, with the coming of Gareth Icenogle, you have more to do: more evangelism, more mission, more stewardship, more growth. With the Lord's help, let this be your motto: "Hats off to the past; coats off to the future."