

Roll Call of the Saints
Romans 16: 1-16 (Romans 16: 1-2 read in worship)
H. Stephen Shoemaker
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Today we witness a roll call of the saints—in Rome and here at Grace. Paul calls 27 names—and that doesn't include the family members and those in the little house churches scattered around Rome. He did not want to leave anybody out! So today: “When the Roll is Called Up Yonder—and Down Here!”

The word “saint” in the New Testament is never in the singular, “saint”, but always in the plural, “saints.” We are a company of saints, no one perfect but all called together to be the hands and feet of Christ.

The word “saint” may be a bit tarnished today, suggesting a “holier-than-thou” type, like a man going around looking for a vacancy in a stained-glass window or like the one Mark Twain described as “a good man in the worst sense of the word.”

But here is Frederick Buechner's description of a saint:

In his holy flirtation with the world God occasionally drops handkerchiefs. These handkerchiefs are called saints.

Saints are those who cause you to love God all the more. They make God's love and grace real. Some have dirt under their fingernails, some have flour on their aprons. Some *do* "grow weary in well-doing", but keep on anyway!

There is a hymn we sometimes sing at Grace on this day.

Rejoice in God's saints, today and all days;
a world without saints forgets how to praise.

Then these lines:

Rejoice in those saints, unpraised and unknown,
who bear someone's cross or shoulder their own.

(Fred Pratt Green)

Do you know anyone like that?

II

In Romans 16 Paul is writing the saints at Rome and calling the roll.

He begins with Phoebe the deacon. Yes, that's the word, *diakonos*, deacon. Some translations translate the word "helper" or "servant". This makes some people less squirmy. A woman deacon?! But a deacon she was!

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchrae, that you welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and assist her in anything she may need for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.

Her generosity had helped keep her church and Paul's mission going.

"Welcome her", Paul says. She is carrying this letter of Paul's from Corinth to Rome. He had entrusted this crucial responsibility to her.

And while you're at it, Paul says, say hello to Priscilla and Aquila my fellow-workers in Christ. They risked their own necks for me. And say hello to the house church meeting in their home.

Say hello to my beloved Epaenetus who was the very first to turn to Christ in Asia.

Say hi to Mary who has worked so hard for us. (Every church has "Marys". Who comes to your mind?)

Say hello to Andronicus and Junia, my kinspeople who went into prison with me. They are prominent among those called "apostles", turning to Christ before I did. Say hello to Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord, and to our fellow worker Urbanus and my beloved Stachys. And Appelles too—I've heard good things about him.

Greet Aristobulus and his family and those who gather in his house church, and Herodion too. Greet in the Lord the family of

Narcissus. (We think Narcissus died under the cruel reign of Emperor Claudius.)

And say hello to the twins, Tryphena and Tryphosa. (Isn't it fun to imagine them? Their names in the Greek mean "Dainty" and "Delicate".) Such hard workers they are, said Paul.

Say hello to Rufus and his mother. (Do you remember Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross for Jesus when he fell on the way to Golgotha? Rufus, we think, is his son.) His mother has been a mother to me, Paul says. (Who are those who, while not being your birth mother, have been like a mother to you? Gifts straight from God!)

And on he went! He closed by saying, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." (It was a regular practice in the early church, mentioned often in the New Testament and early church writings) Like the "passing of the peace" in some churches or the holy hugs in

Baptist-type churches). Then he added, “All the churches everywhere greet you!”

What a picture of the church in Rome! Jew, Gentile, Greek and Roman, young and old, rich and poor, who met in small house churches around the city. What a roll call of saints.

III

And what about the company of saints at Grace! We must begin with the founding families who almost fifty years ago dreamed of founding a mission-centered church and who believed that there was more than one way to be Baptist. We salute them and their children and grandchildren and now great-grandchildren whose continued faithfulness and leadership enrich us still today.

We have called the roll of those who have died in our church family over these 50 years. A holy moment for us.

Carlyle Marney talked about our “balcony people”, those who have touched our lives and now cheer us on from the balcony of

heaven. Can you see their faces, hear their voices? It's what the book of Hebrews meant when it said, "Therefore, since we then are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses... let us run the race that is set before us!" (Hebrews 12:1)

Who have been saints to you here? Who have been saints to you in other times and places? In Philippians Paul writes, "I thank my God for every remembrance of you" (Philippians 1:3).

Sometime today take that verse and write it down on a piece of paper, then write the name of someone who comes to your mind. Then another.

And right after that Paul writes, "always in my prayers for you making my prayer with joy, thankful", he writes, "for our partnership in the gospel", our *koinonia eis to evangelion*" our partnership, companionship, fellowship, friendship in the gospel, the good news of Christ. "What a fellowship, what a joy divine."

I've heard the beautiful stories you tell about the saints of Grace, past and present. And I've seen you at work and worship, mission and personal connection, "companions in the gospel". Saints yourselves.

Take Habitat For Humanity: you've built a number of homes through them so people with little means can have a home of their own. They talk about the Theology of the Hammer! There's the Theology of the Casserole too. And the Theology of the Cup of Coffee, and the Theology of the Phone Call. There's the Theology of the Song and the Theology of Prayer. We can't always pray as we want to, but there are those praying for us and with us. There is the Theology of Presence, the ministry of presence when just to go and sit by another is the grace of God. There's the Ministry of Money—which is what the Church of the Savior calls the spiritual practice of stewardship. There's the ministry of Food and Clothing and Safe Shelter which gives people a safe place to sleep and live.

When I was in my little Kentucky farming church there was one Sunday a year when we called off Sunday worship so everybody could help everybody else “put up tobacco”—cut it and bind it and hoist it up to the rafters to cure. The Theology of the Neighborhood, the holy practice of being neighbors.

Later in my church in Louisville there was a woman named Louise Dorman whose ministry for years had been the Ministry of Flowers. Every Sunday she arranged the flowers in a vase to be placed on a flower stand behind the choir in the baptismal pool.

Some Sundays she would be sitting near the front during worship, and she'd look at the flowers and determine they were crooked. So she would creep up to the side door and enter the baptistry to fix the flowers. She would bend as low as she could so as not to be seen, and make her way to the center of the pool where she would straighten the vase. She mistakenly believed that if she couldn't see the congregation, they couldn't see *her*! She had this high beehive hairdo, a little like Marge Simpson. So as she made her

way to the flower stand, through the glass in the front of the baptistry, you could see her beehive hairdo bobbing along the way. It happened over and over again. Some Sundays while preaching I could see the faces of the congregation suddenly follow her from left to right of the baptistry on her way. After awhile I figured it out. And I'd smile to myself and say to myself "There she goes again." Saint Louise.

I've seen choir members who for year after year have dedicated one night a week for practice and on Sundays sing us into the presence of God.

I've seen Sunday School teachers teach children most of their lives, making the Bible come to life, loving them in their arms.

I've seen guys whose ministry post all their lives was the foyer, greeting people. Never underestimate the importance of ushers!

I've seen saints who if something broke down in the church building were always there to help, tools in hand.

Are you beginning to make your list? I am.

The “communion of saints” is what the church has called it through the centuries, when the community is gathered, those in this life and those in heaven, gathered as one.

Some of us, long ago, used to sing, “When We All Get to Heaven, What a Day of Rejoicing That Will Be!” We don’t have to wait til then!