

Title: Just a List of Names
Text: Romans 16
Preacher: Eddie Bellis
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After over thirty years of ministry, I need to confess something to you: when I was younger, I used to hurry past Romans 16. I did not mean to be dismissive, arrogant, or rude. I simply thought Romans 16 was “just a list of names.” And honestly, many pastors quietly think the same thing.

When we go looking for a sermon, we naturally reach for burning bushes, parted seas, visions of heaven, empty tombs, Pentecost fire, or Jesus’ calming storms and calling children to himself. Even Paul gives us fifteen chapters in Romans that feel like scaling theological mountains. He writes about ideas such as sin and grace, law and faith, death and resurrection, Jew and Gentile, and the mercy of God.

Then suddenly, in chapter 16, we arrive at what appears to be... greetings. He says, “Greet Prisca and Aquila.” “Greet Mary.” “Greet Andronicus and Junia.” “Greet Rufus.”

And if we are honest, part of us wonders whether we can skip ahead to something more important. But somewhere along the way, life humbles you. And when life humbles you, you begin to realize something strange about the kingdom of God: the holiest things are often hiding in places we almost overlook.

God’s presence is not always found in spectacle and grandeur. Sometimes God shows up around kitchen tables, sometimes in whispered prayers around a hospital bed, sometimes in casseroles delivered after funerals, and sometimes in ordinary people whose names never appear in headlines, but whose faithfulness quietly holds the world together. Maybe Romans 16 is one of those upside-down places.

Because perhaps this chapter is not “just a list” at all. Maybe Romans 16 gives us one of the truest pictures of the Church in all of scripture. When you live long enough, you eventually realize your own life is mostly made up of names.

Years ago, one of my former congregations gave me a quilt. Not the kind you fold away into a closet, but the kind you hang on the wall because part of your soul lives inside it. This wonderful work of art is blue and beautifully stitched together, square by square, by a woman named Ruth Ann Puckett.

Ruth Ann and I became close over the years at Westminster Presbyterian in Richmond, VA. She used to tell me I reminded her of her son, who was also a pastor serving another church. She attended nearly every class I taught.

One of those classes met every Monday night. We called it “Bible From Scratch.” Week after week, we slowly walked through the Old Testament together. Prophets, kings, exiles, wilderness wanderings, and stories of people discovering God in unexpected places.

When we finished the Old Testament, Ruth Ann quietly gathered the class and asked them to sign quilt squares with their favorite Bible verses. Then at Christmas, she presented me with the quilt.

Now every time I move into a new church or home, I hang it on the wall. And every time I look at it, I remember names in that caring place. I remember Kitty Bradley, who lost her son to cancer and somehow turned her grief outward into compassion for others. I remember Carl Carden, who genuinely cared about me but once voted against my raise because, as he explained with complete seriousness, “we need to balance the budget.” Honestly, that may be one of the most Presbyterian sentences ever spoken. I remember Ed Johnson, who rarely spoke during meetings, but when he did, everyone listened because his words carried weight.

To someone else, that quilt might simply look decorative. But to me? That quilt is not just cloth. That piece is testimony, a witness. Ruth Ann’s love is stitched into fabric. The names written there remind me that the gospel never happens in abstraction. And maybe that is what Paul is doing in Romans 16.

Remember where Paul is when he writes this letter. He is nearing the end of his ministry. He has been imprisoned, beaten, and exhausted by the work of the gospel. And after writing fifteen chapters of breathtaking theology, he closes his letter not with one final doctrinal argument, but with gratitude for people. Paul says, “Greet Prisca and Aquila.” “Greet Mary.” “Greet Rufus and his mother.”

The towering theologian of Christianity ends his greatest theological letter with names. Why? Because Paul understands something we often forget: the gospel always becomes flesh in people. As followers of Jesus, our faith is not merely ideas floating in abstraction; it’s the power of the Holy Spirit who creates relationships, friendships, communities, shared burdens, shared meals, and shared lives.

And perhaps that matters especially on this Day of Pentecost and Memorial Day weekend. Because taken together, we are reminded that remembrance is holy work. With Memorial Day, we speak rightly about “the fallen” and “those who served.” But if we are not careful, even sacrifice can become abstract.

Until one name breaks through.

Years ago, I walked with my father along the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC. At first, the wall simply looked like endless rows of names etched into black marble. My father walked ahead while I stayed behind to give him space. Then suddenly he stopped.

He stood ramrod straight for a moment, leaned forward, and placed his finger against the wall. Then quietly, he whispered one word: “Bill.” And I could see a tear forming in the corner of my dad’s eye. Who was Bill? You don’t know him, but I do. Bill was his roommate at West Point. Bill was his best friend. He and Bill went on their first assignment together in Korea. He and Bill underwent rigorous training and discipline to become Green Berets. And Bill never came home.

And suddenly the wall was no longer “just a list of names” for my dad. Those names held a memory, and that wall became a holy presence.

My father’s shoulders shook, not because he was weak, but because his love for Bill refused to disappear simply because someone was gone.

Isn’t that what Church is about? We are surrounded by a Great Cloud of Witnesses cheering us onward in our race. We speak on anniversaries of those in our distant past into our Prayers of the People. And perhaps that is what names do. Names keep love alive.

And perhaps that is why Romans 16 belongs beside Pentecost. When we think of Pentecost, we usually imagine wind and fire and miraculous languages. But the deeper miracle of Pentecost is this: the Holy Spirit formed a people. Complete strangers became neighbors. Distant neighbors became family. Different languages and backgrounds became one communion in Christ.

And suddenly Pentecost begins to sound a lot like Romans 16. Paul said, “Prisca, Aquila, Junia, Mary, and Rufus.” Friends, they are not “just a list.” These names are evidence that the Holy Spirit actually moved.

Without the Spirit, Romans 16 is merely a list of greetings. Yet, with the Spirit, it becomes the Church.

A few years ago, I sat on a green metal bench outside a courthouse in eastern North Carolina. The kind of courthouse that looks worn but faithful. After a while, a man sat beside me. We did not know each other. But benches, like pews, sometimes make room for truth.

Eventually, he rubbed his hands together and quietly said, “Been in there all day. Trying to get it right. Trying to do better. But... you know.” He stopped and shook his head. He never finished the sentence. He did not have to. We all have an “it.”

And sitting there in that humid silence, I realized grace was happening right there on that bench. No choir. No sanctuary. No stained-glass windows. Just two people and the mysterious presence of God between them.

And if I had known his name, I would have written it down. Because that is what the Spirit does. The Spirit keeps writing the names of Romans 16 in every generation.

So maybe this Pentecost and Memorial Day weekend invites us not to skip past the names in our own lives. We are called to remember them. We are called to speak to them. We are to remember to give thanks for them.

The teacher who carried your faith when yours was weak. The friend who sat beside you in grief. The veteran who sacrificed more than words can repay. The mother who prayed for you. The church member who quietly kept showing up year after year. The ordinary saint whose faithfulness became one of the clearest signs of God you have ever known.

Because Christianity is never simply about “me and God.” The Holy Spirit creates a communion, or fellowship. We are the body of Christ formed by a people stitched together by grace.

And maybe one of the saddest spiritual dangers of modern life is that we begin to see people as categories, crowds, statistics, or passing strangers. But the Spirit keeps resisting abstraction. The Spirit keeps giving us faces, stories, and names.

On Memorial Day weekend, we remember those whose names are carved into stone. On Pentecost, we remember that God carves those names into the heart of the Church. And perhaps that is the final truth Romans 16 leaves us with:

What appears to be “just a list” is actually a witness to the power of the Holy Spirit at work in ordinary lives. Because in the kingdom of God, names are never “just names.” They are the places where grace became visible. They are evidence that love endured. They are proof that the Spirit was here.