

Roll Call

Rev. Dr. Michael Piazza

All Saints' Sunday, November 4, 2018

Romans 16:1-16/ John 11:32-44

Written and delivered with great thanks to my preaching professor and mentor Dr. Fred Craddock.

I love the teaching of the rabbis and other wise spiritual guides who, when asked about the stories of the heroes of faith, would say, "I don't know if this really happened, but I know that it's true."

On All Saints' Sunday, we often think saints are spiritual superheroes, but the Bible tells us we **all** are saints. Literally, the word means "people who belong to God." When I think of the people who've had the greatest influence on my life, I realize most of them were ordinary women and men who lived like they belonged to God and showed me that I do too. Facts we can read in a book, but saints are people from whom we learn the truth.



As I remember the people for whom I am grateful, I thought of a sermon by Dr. Fred Craddock, my preaching professor and mentor. Fred died a couple of years ago, but he taught me most of what I know about preaching, and this sermon comes from him.

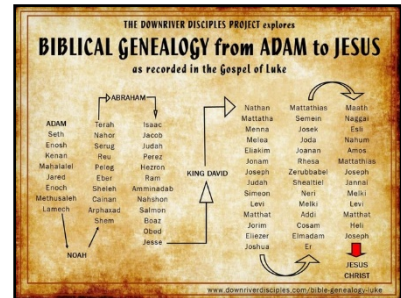


Dr. Craddock was a short, jovial man with a rather unusual voice, but he could read the back of a cereal box and make it inspirational. Still, I was surprised one

day when he announced he was going to preach from the 16th chapter of Romans.

You heard that passage read very well a few minutes ago, and you can be forgiven if your heart was not all aflutter. It, mostly, is a list of strange names.

Apparently, ancient Jews were compulsive about these things, because the Bible is full of lists.



In this chapter, it seems the Apostle Paul is calling the roll. Paul had never been to Rome, so one wonders how he knew all the folks on this list. Although boring, Paul's list tells us a bit about the church in Rome:

There is a husband and wife, Aquila and Priscilla.

There is Rufus and his mother.

There is a sister and a brother.

There are two men, Andronicus and Junius.

There are two women who might be twins,

Traphaena and Traphosa.

There is a single woman, Mary, and a single man, Herodian.

There is an older man named Persisus.



On and on it goes, and the funny thing is there is not a nuclear family in the lot. For Paul, this is not a list. Don't call it a list.

Paul is in the home of Gaius in Corinth where he is packing his things to move on to his next assignment. His plan is to go back to Jerusalem and then to revisit



several the churches that he founded. He planned to make his way to Rome, so he could visit these friends to whom he writes.

After visiting them in Rome, he plans to go to Spain, which, in his day, was literally the end of the earth. Unfortunately, his trip does not go as planned. Here is an example that even the prayers of the saints sometimes go unanswered.

A prison cell awaits Paul in Jerusalem, and, though he eventually makes it to Rome, it is as a prisoner, and, there, according to legend, Paul is executed.

Paul never makes it to Spain, but he, of course, doesn't know that yet. So, he packs. He is cleaning out his desk and throwing things away. He's not as young as he used to be, so he's learned to travel light. As he works, he comes across letters from old friends he made over the years, many of whom ended up in the church in Rome. So, sitting among the boxes, Paul looks at the letters and remembers these friends in Rome. Don't call it a list.

When I left the Methodist church in Lake Park, Georgia where I had been a student pastor, the women of the congregation made me a quilt. Each family brought a patch of cloth, and the women stitched the families' names on the individual patches. Every winter, for many years after, when I took out that quilt and spread it on the bed, I would remember those families.



There's Mrs. Sarah who initiated the quilt project. She was a Methodist preacher's widow and was the first person I visited when I got to town. I was young and nervous because I knew she was the widow of a very important pastor. As I sat in the parlor with her that day, I remembered hearing her husband preach when I was just a kid.

He told a story that I still recall. I'm not sure if the story was about him or someone else, but, apparently, a young pastor went to visit an elderly parishioner one day. When she went to get them both a glass of tea, he helped himself to a handful of nuts from the bowl on the coffee table. They had a nice visit, but, when he got up to leave, he noticed that, in his nervous state, he had eaten every single nut in the bowl.

He was terribly embarrassed, but the old woman waved her hand. "Don't worry pastor," she said. "A friend gave me a box of chocolate-covered nuts, but, since I lost my teeth, all I can do is suck the chocolate off."

Well, I never eat nuts when I visit someone, but I remembered that story and Mrs. Sarah every time I look at that quilt.

And there is Miss B.'s patch. Her husband, Mr. Paul, played baseball for the Chicago Cubs back in the 1920s. He must have told me the story about striking out the great Ty Cobb a hundred times.

And Ralph Dawkins, who voted against, and persuaded others to vote against, raising my salary. He thought \$6,200 a year was too much to pay a preacher.

And Evelyn. She insisted I call her by her first name, though she was 20 years older than my grandmother at the time. Her quilt stitches are crooked because she could hardly see. The treasurer always worried that the bank wouldn't take her tithe checks because no one could read her writing.

It is not just a quilt. Don't call it a list.

Paul recalled Aquila and Priscilla, whose generosity kept the church going in hard times. They risked their own lives to save mine, Paul wrote.

Andronicus and Junius, we were in jail together. Two brave souls.

And Mary. She was such a hard worker. She always stayed after everyone had gone to help straighten up, and she never complained.

And Rufus, "Tell Rufus hello, and give my best to his mother because she is like a mother to me, too. Every morning, she'd fix us a big breakfast. 'That's okay,' I would always say, "we're in a bit of a hurry." But she would point her spoon at me and say, 'Sit down and eat. I don't care if you are an apostle you need a good breakfast.' Tell my mother hello."

This is not a list. Don't call it a list.

What about you gathered here on this All Saints' Sunday? Are there people from your life that you would like or need to remember? Why don't you take your bulletin and write down the names of three or four saints who have helped to make you who you are? Go ahead. Make your own list. Just write their first names. You will know who they are.



In the movie "Secondhand Lions," Walter is a boy who's been left in the care of two old men, distant relatives, who live in rural Texas raising an old, secondhand circus lion. Walter's mother ran off, and, because of her, Walter has a tough time trusting anyone or believing they will tell him the truth.

As these two old men try to teach the boy how to be a man, they tell him stories about their own lives, stories about being in the Foreign Legion, fighting in Africa,

and loving a princess. Late one night, out by the pond, afraid that one of his uncles is about to die, Walter confronts him about all the stories. Secretly, Walter hopes his uncles really are heroic figures who can teach him how to live his own life heroically.

His uncle tries to teach young Walter about believing in the important things, whether they are true or not. Things like, good always triumphs over evil, people are basically good, and love, true love never dies.

Look at your list in your hand or in your heart. Those people taught you the most important lessons of your life, not facts, perhaps, but truth?

Let me give you some advice. Next time life takes you on one of these strange, unexpected, twisting rides, **take your list.**

You may have to leave behind your home, or your job, or your most valued possessions, but take your list. In fact, even when the time comes for you to leave this life behind, take your list.

I know, I know, when you get to the pearly gates, St. Peter's gonna say, "You went into the world with nothing, and you can't bring anything with you when you die. What's that you've got in your hand?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Just a piece of paper with some names on it."

"Well let me see it," he says.

"It's nothing, just a list. It's just some folks that were important to me. They taught me about what was true and really valuable."

"Let me see it," Peter insists.

You hand him your list and say, "It won't mean a thing to you."

"Of course, it does," says Peter. "I know all of these people. In fact, on my way here to meet you, I passed a group of them. They were painting a great big banner to hang over the street.

"The sign said:



Amen.