

Title: A Welcoming Church
Biblical Text: Romans 16:1-2
Teaching Series: Justified by Love
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Preacher: Jason C. Helveston

Romans 16:1-2

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.

Paul begins his descent. He's ending his letter with a long lists of personal greetings and final reminders. And so for the final month our study of the book of Romans, we're going to be introduced to over twenty-five different people who are friends of Paul's or members of the church in Rome. While this may seem like an uninteresting list of people common in correspondence of antiquity ... as we read Paul's final words to Rome, we'll have a lot to learn about what it means to be the church.

He begins with a woman named Phoebe. Paul commends her to the Church in Rome and he asks them to "*welcome her in the Lord.*" That's what I want to talk about. I want to talk about what he means by that. I want to talk about what it means to be a welcoming church. As we'll see, I don't think Paul is talking about

being warm toward her or saying hello and seeing if she'd like a cup of coffee at the church gathering (though those are all valuable and wonderful things). What Paul is after, what we must discover ... is a spirit of uncommon acceptance that is directly informed by the truth and beauty of the gospel. We're going to learn about the unique call of Christianity to welcome.

Here's how we'll organize our time ...

- The *person* we welcome.
- The *way* we welcome.
- The *reason* we welcome.

[Prayer]

Movement 1: The Person We Welcome (v.1, Romans 12:13,15:7, 1 Timothy 3:2, 1 Peter 4:9)

The church was always meant to be a place of welcome. Author Rosaria Butterfield believes the call of every Christian is to what she calls *radically ordinary hospitality*. In her book, *The Gospel Comes with a Housekey*, Butterfield explains that Christian community, especially our homes, is meant to be a context that daily "*seeks to make strangers neighbors, and neighbors family of God*" (31). There's no better word to summarize the calling of the Church to welcome people than *hospitality*. In New Testament Greek "hospitality" is a compound word which

means to *welcome the stranger*. We've seen this word in Romans and it's sprinkled throughout the biblical writings.

- Previously in Romans Paul wrote, ***Read Romans 12:13 ... Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.*** Saints are believers. And together we're meant to be welcoming; each other and those around us who we may or may not know.
- When Paul was telling his protégé Timothy about the qualifications of an elder or what he calls an overseer (simply leaders in the local church), he said, ***Read 1 Timothy 3:2 ... Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach.*** Elder are required to be hospitable, welcoming.
- The Apostle Peter tells a number of churches who were suffering and facing persecution ... ***Read 1 Peter 4:9 ... Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.*** Christians all supposed to make strangers neighbors and neighbors family of God ... even in the most challenging of circumstances.

Christians are supposed to be the most welcoming and inviting and inclusive and making-friends kind of people on the planet. *Right?*

Well ...

This may be our aspirational calling, but I think if we're honest in American in particular, on the whole the Christian Church isn't really known by our welcoming spirit. *Are we?* Comedian Pete Holmes opens his new Netflix special with a profound indictment on our collective reputation. Sarcastically he suggests replacing "Merry Christmas!" with ... "***May the birth of the one and only true God, Jesus Christ bestow a blessing of grace and peace upon your household to the belittlement of every other false religion lest you be gay***" (*Pete Holmes: I Am Not for Everyone*). Instead of being known for welcome, far too often we're known for condemnation and exclusion. You see, the Greek compound word for hospitality is ***philoxenia***. That is *love + stranger*. However, what we continue to battle in our hearts and in our churches is ***xenophobia***. That is *stranger + fear*. We aren't known for our love. Far too often we're known by our fear. The Lord discerned a similar fear in our spiritual forebears. And through Isaiah he corrected them in the strongest terms, ***Read Isaiah 8:11-13 ... For the Lord spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying: "Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.*** Fear grips us when we simply go with the flow of our own cultural moment. And we don't make strangers neighbors or neighbors family of God.

How does this happen? How have those tasked with hospitality instead been gripped with fear like everyone else? What's more, how can God's people be freed

from such a crippling trap? Well, I think a woman named Phoebe is going to help us gain clarity today.

That's who Paul begins with in his very personal commendation and subsequent greetings. Look at Romans 16:1. ***Read Romans 16:1 ... I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae.*** Now, from this and other context clues is likely that Paul has asked Phoebe to carry the letter of Romans to Rome. Remember, he's heading back to Jerusalem to deliver a financial gift. Surprisingly, we learn a ton about Phoebe by this ostensibly simple instruction. We learn about the *person* we welcome.

- We learn about her culture. Phoebe's family is not only Greek, but they likely had deep roots in pagan worship before Phoebe's conversion to Christianity. *How do we know that?* Well, she not only from the Greek city of Cenchreae but she's also named after the Greek god Apollo, who also went by *Phoebus Apollo* (named after his maternal aunt).
- We learn about her gender. Phoebe is a woman. Obviously, many divisions persist today between men and women in the local church. This is not news. But what is noteworthy is that the great apostle saw no reason why a woman should not only be trusted with delivering the book of Romans, but also as the deliverer she was likely going to be tasked with reading the letter, answering questions about its author and content, and even with expounding upon it's meaning when she arrived in Rome. (It's passage like this that has

led our church family on a project recently to rethink our understanding about women's role within the local church, especially as it relates to teaching.)

- We also learn about her social status. Phoebe is a wealthy, perhaps business owner who likely already has responsibilities in Rome. Some even think because Paul calls her a "patron" in v.2 (which is a legal term) that she was going to Rome to either litigate or participate in some kind of lawsuit. All of this would have been countercultural for a woman ... to be wealthy and involved in such legal affairs.
- Finally, we learn about her service to the church. Phoebe is an active member and servant in her local church. More particularly, she seems like a deacon in her church. That word "servant" is the word is *diakonos* which means deacon, found throughout the New Testament's instruction about the formal office of deacons.

Okay, so Paul is telling the young church in Rome about the *person* they are to welcome. In doing so, we learn about the type of person we're supposed to welcome. You see, they are commended to welcome to someone, they might otherwise fear.

Phoebe ... a Greek, formerly idolatrous woman, who's extremely wealthy and influential, and is also a humble and loving leader in the local church in Cenchreae.

He's telling Romans to welcome a Greek. He's telling men to welcome a woman. He's telling the poor to welcome the wealthy. He's telling one church to welcome the servant of another. That's the *person* we welcome. They may well be asking ... *How could we welcome someone who is so complex ... in process ... and so different from the rest of us? Do you see?* He's inviting them to welcome the type of person they instinctively might fear. So, *how could they love this stranger?* Well, Paul's ultimate answer is found in the first thing he said about Phoebe. *She's our sister.* You see, the truest thing about Phoebe is she's family. That's the defining identity of Phoebe. She's a daughter of God. We're family.

Movement 2: The Way We Welcome (v.2, Colossians 3:23-24, Ephesians 2:19, 1 Corinthians 8:13-14)

The *person* we're called to welcome is someone we'd otherwise fear. But who is actually our family. *You see? Strangers are made neighbors, and neighbors made family.* That's the *person*. So, *what's the way we welcome?* That's what Paul explains next. *Read Romans 16:2 ... that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.* There's not only a command to welcome Phoebe, there are further instructions about how she ought to be seen and received and loved by the community. Paul says at least three things about the way we're supposed to welcome those we might fear, especially fellow followers of Jesus.

We welcome as worship.

He says, *welcome her in the Lord.*

While on the surface welcoming someone like Phoebe may simply be a matter of social kindness, Paul's instructions are in the language of worship. After all, ***Read Colossians 3:23-24 ... Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.*** The way we welcome is the way of worship. It's in the Lord. It's unto the Lord. It's for the Lord. First and foremost we don't welcome people so we're known as a welcoming church ... nor do we welcome so people feel good ... nor do we welcome because we feel good ... we welcome because God tells us to welcome. We welcome because God is worthy. We welcome because no matter what we're doing, we're doing it for his glory.

What's more, our worship becomes the welcome. Theologian Marva Dawn explains, *"If believers worship with gladness and passion, anyone not yet a part of the community certainly will be attracted to the One who is the object of their worship"* (*Royal Waste of Time*, 131). We welcome as worship and our worship becomes our welcome.

We welcome as fellow saints.

Paul says, welcome her *in a way worth of the saints.*

Sainthood is an idea we don't discuss very often in Protestant churches. But if you grew up or are familiar with the Orthodox or Catholic Church, then it's much more familiar. Biblically speaking, a saint is someone who is holy or set apart. While in some traditions or in common parlance the term may cause us to think about super-Christians or ultra-religious people, but according to the Bible anyone who is in Christ, anyone who is a follower of Jesus is a saint. They are set apart. By grace. By righteousness. By God. Not only does Paul address his letters to the *saints* in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, and Colossae, but he helps them understand that they, ***Read Ephesians 2:19 ... are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. Strangers, neighbors. Neighbors, family.*** You see, we're all set apart. But not from each other. Rather we are set apart *with* each other ... *from* the world in holiness and *for* God by grace. And so we ought to welcome one another in holiness as holy people, saints.

And Phoebe in particular is living out this holy call. Check out v.2 again. ***Read Romans 16:2 ... that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.*** She's been a help to many, including Paul. In other words, she's living this out. She's welcoming. She's worshiping. She's a saint and living accordingly. Therefore we should honor such people by reciprocating their honorable example.

Some in the Catholic Church are still seeking sainthood for a woman named Dorothy Day. She was a fierce advocate for the poor and marginalized. But she

famously said, "*Don't call me a saint. I don't want to be dismissed so easily.*"

Sainthood often feels disconnected from reality. Day, and true saints, embrace holiness in the deepest sorrows and celebrations of life, welcoming the least, the last, and the lost.

We welcome as creatures.

Pauls says, *help here in whatever she may need from you.*

As we've said, Phoebe is wealthy and likely more than self-sufficient. Many commentators suggest that since Paul doesn't list any of Phoebe's traveling companions (as was customary), she likely had her own entourage or support system. And yet, the Roman Christians are still instructed to "*help her in whatever she may need.*" Welcoming one another is about meeting needs. It's about understanding the limitations, frailties, and basic necessities of life which everyone requires ... and making sure that everyone has what they need.

But I want to suggest to you, this goes both ways. In order for Rome to meet Phoebe's needs, Phoebe is going to have to admit she has needs. *I'm looking at you church.* Most of us are good with meeting the needs of others. But we have a really hard time admitting our own. *Right?* But this is the way Christian community works. If you only meet needs, we can't welcome the way we should. Paul address this particularly in Corinth writing, *Read 1 Corinthians 8:13-14 ... For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that*

their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. When we share our needs and meet needs we welcome one another like creature, made in the image of God, created to be dependent on him and one another.

When we we worship, fearing God and making him central to all we do ... we learn to reject fear and welcome others.

When we see like saints, living with holiness ... we're learning to reject fear and welcome others.

When we admit our needs and see the needs of others ... we're learning to reject fear and welcome others.

The *person* we welcome we might otherwise fear.

The *way* we welcome reflects God and his family.

So, *what's the reason?*

Movement 3: The Reason We Welcome (v.2b, Romans 15:7)

Well, it should be reiterated that hospitality isn't simply about our behavior as Christians. It's about our beliefs. It's about our fundamental understanding of the gospel. It's seeing our purpose and modeling our lives in the way of the death of Christ. The gospel isn't just a message of what Jesus has done and who he is, but it's also a framework for how we see the world and shape our lives.

Paul said in the previous chapter while addressing issues of division and infighting in the church, *Read Romans 15:7 ... Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.* So, if we want to know the primary *reason* we welcome others ... we need to consider that we were first welcomed or loved or received. We were the strangers made neighbors. We were neighbors made family. *How did Christ welcome us?* Through his death. As sinful people we were estranged from our Heavenly Father. Sin separates. Let's not get it twisted. Sin never fosters intimacy. Sin never cultivates community. Sin is always a threat to a welcoming church. That means holiness is a prerequisite to fellowship and inclusion.

And so, graciously, through his death Jesus not only pays the penalty for our sins but his blood, were told in places like Hebrews, his blood cleans and washes us pure. We've been welcomed through a sacrifice that produces holiness. It is often inconvenient and costly and even painful to welcome some people. And that's what we're called to do as the Church. When we welcome the stranger we're not just showing human kindness to another image bearer ... we're also demonstrating the gospel and bringing glory to God.

Often our common concepts of welcome are without holiness. In other words, we think about including people in our lives as an act of love, not as an act of truth. But the gospel does not separate the two. The good news is that love and truth are wed together forever. That means, we do not have welcome without holiness. Welcoming Phoebe was a matter of obedience and holiness, not just love. It was

about driving out the sins of fear ... hatred ... otherness ... and idolatry. Are you with me? In order to welcome Phoebe well, Rome would have to worship ... interrogate and confess their fears ... admit their needs ... and make the gospel central. They were going to have to remember they were strangers, made neighbors and neighbors, made family.

A church that knows they have been welcomed by love and truth, will welcome by love and truth.