

**Augusta First Baptist Church**  
**Romans 16**  
*Phoebe, Priscilla, Persis and other Unknowns*  
**January 27, 2008**  
**Biography Series**

NRS Romans 16:1 "*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, 2 so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well 3 Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, 4 and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. 5 Greet also the church in their house. ...*

*...25 Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages 26 but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith-- 27 to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen."*

This morning our *Biography* series takes us to a list of names including three women: Phoebe, Prisca (or Priscilla in some parts of the Bible) and Persis. I wonder, who among us today, could tell us much of anything on any one of these persons. Of course, we all know about Persis Menefee, she is a beloved member of our church. But I am talking about the one in the New Testament. We can group these women within a larger family in the Bible, who are on the whole, anonymous, unidentified, or otherwise indistinguishable. In fact, that can pretty much be attributed to almost all those names listed in chapter 16. Joseph, Ruth and Samson are three that we have already focused on in this biography series. There are many others like Abraham, Moses, Jacob, Paul, Peter, Sarah, or Matthew who are familiar even to a novice student of scripture. But the chances are quite good that Phoebe, Prisca, and Persis are unknown to most all of us.

Phoebe is mentioned only once, in the first verse of Romans 16. Her name means radiant or bright. We know she is a deacon, although some translations call her servant. *Deacon* is the exact same Greek word that Timothy uses in giving instructions to deacons. But beyond her role as a deacon and benefactor of the church, that is all we know. Some scholars speculate that because she heads the list of Paul, Phoebe was the one who hand delivered this letter or Epistle to Rome.

Priscilla, who is also called Prisca, has more written about her than Phoebe, but still there are few sermons and Bible studies where she is the primary subject. We know that along with Aquila, she is mentioned not only in Romans, but Acts, 1 Corinthians, and 2 Timothy. In four out of the six references of Prisca, she is mentioned first, which adds to her importance in the role of the early church. They were leaders and interpreters of the early church. We know from this text that a church met in their house, which was where churches met in the early centuries of Christianity. Additionally, Prisca and Aquila were fellow tentmakers with Paul.

What about Persis? Well, with sincere apologies to our own Persis, she is mentioned only once, and all we read about her is that Paul sends his greetings in verse 12 of Romans 16 and says: "*greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord.*"

What does this list of indistinguishable believers have to say to us this morning? They are important people, even if you have never heard of them. Let me tell you why: ***The hope of the Christian faith rests not upon the giants of faith.***

This group was part of...

**A Family of Unknowns**

Out of twenty-seven names, twenty-three are mentioned *only* in this list. Yet, Paul commits not a little bit of space encouraging the Roman Christians to receive or greet them. God trusts the *good news* with the *nameless*.

That may be tough for some of us to swallow, given the celebrity-driven culture in which we live. We watch TV shows called *American Idol* and buy magazines dedicated to those stars, whose living depends on the headlines.

When I was a senior in high school I received in a letter in the mail that said something to the effect, “Congratulations! You have been selected to be listed in this year’s book of ‘Who’s Who.’” Wow! Me! I hastily sent the check, that would assure my place along the hall of greatness and a few months later received my book, with my picture that was no bigger than a dime and a bio filled with abbreviations that no one could understand or translate. The irony is, that in the flattery, I craved to be known, I was placed in a book that nobody will read, and let’s face it, nobody cares.

You see, life is not about the celebrities of culture and commerce and church. You have a place in God’s list of who’s who. You are needed, you are important, you are essential in God’s economy, not because of talent, fame or popularity. But, because the family of God is primarily populated with the unknowns and unheralded.

Secondly, this group was part of...

### **A Family of Underdogs**

There is something interesting about the biographies of this list. While we may not know much of anything about their personal backgrounds, we do know that six out of twenty-seven names are women. While this hardly seems radical to our modern ears, this was a bold acclaim on Paul’s part.

Women, as we know from previous messages, were more or less considered property during the days of antiquity. Rabbis forbid males from speaking to women in public. Yet, here is Paul, not only trusting the delivery of this letter to a woman, but then precedes to list five other women he wishes to greet – right there in black and white no less! Paul was no Roman male chauvinist, as we sometimes caricature him, but transgresses cultural norms because God’s agenda demanded it.

Let’s return to this lady named Persis, whom we only read of once in all of scripture. The name itself was not even common in Rome and when it is used, it is often the name of a slave. Persis, more than likely immigrated to Rome and as an outsider worked hard, thus winning the praise of Paul in his greeting. Hers is not the name of the wealthy, famous or influential. She was just Persis, beloved, Paul wrote, and a hard worker.

This biography is about a family of underdogs. It is part of God’s story.

In the words of John Prine, “No, we’re not the jet set, we’re the old Chevrolet set, but ain’t we got love.” Not all belong to the esteemed and powerful, the important people, or the shakers and movers. The good news is not really concerned about that anyway. It is made up of a family of underdogs – the outcasts of society, the marginalized of culture, the ones who usually don’t get a voice and whose opinions are rarely regarded.

Frequently, “important” people visit our church. We are tempted to look at those whose names we know and whose faces we recognize as the special guests among us. Yet, to do so, is to trade off the core of who we are. We are, by and large, the unknowns, the underdogs, and finally, along with this Biblical class, we are...

### **A Family...**

That is simply it – we are family. We are our best when we reflect a wonderful mosaic of diversity. We believe such diversity deepens our community and demonstrates a hopeful model for the world.

While this rather oddball collection of biographies tells us very little about the individuals, we are reminded that those believers in Rome were destined to shape a church that was the strongest of them all. Even today, one cannot escape the impact Rome has had in modern Christendom.

We may not get that feature written about us in the paper when we die. A collection of our memoirs may not ever get published. Famous or not, however, we belong together in God’s great family of faith: the weak, the strong, the unknown, and the underdog.

And so, Paul ends this section with, “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” Oh yes, a literal kiss. Could be on the lips and could be on the cheek. It is still practiced in most cultures today, including Europe and Asia. The act of greeting one another with a holy kiss is building a new social reality. It communicates: “we belong together.”

Sean Taylor tells the story of his mother who “works with handicapped children who are mainstreamed in the public schools.” One of her more challenging students - a kind boy, with too much energy - was playing with a ball during recess. He kicked the ball over the fence, and as the kindergarten teacher moved to retrieve it, the little boy said he could go. Not knowing the child, she opened the gate and watched him run to the ball, but as he reached it he didn’t stop. Instead, he kept running at full speed! The teacher panicked and raced after him. Across the field was the middle school, and the buses were lined up in preparation for the bell. The little boy ran in between the buses and out of sight. As [His mother] and the teacher raced out from the buses, all they saw was a busy street. Then from behind them they heard pounding. Inside one of the buses the little boy was shouting, “Mrs. Taylor, I am on a big bus!”

A little boy who had only known the short bus, bested the teachers and raced to triumph, getting on the big bus. A little boy whose name will probably not make it in the paper or be selected to chair important boards or committees needs to be told that the gospel is made up of folks like him. In the economy of God, the little boy has *always* been on the big bus, always been his child, always loved, and he makes the list of who’s who every time.

Yes, this is short bus theology. When John the Baptist had his doubts about Jesus and asked, “*Are you the one?*” Jesus said: “*Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.* (Matthew 11:4-6)

The sub-text of Paul’s closing comments in his letter to the Roman Christians is that the good news can be trusted with credentialed and uncredentialed, the upper class and the low class and the middle class, the degreed, pedigreed and undegreed, to the unknown, the underdog, and all the rest. This good news cannot be limited, contained, manipulated or used. It is God’s good news and no other agenda can be brought except to hear and to share.

In a few moments you will be invited to stand where you are and while you don’t have to kiss your neighbor, I would like you to offer your hand to someone next to you and say: “I am glad you are here.” And I am glad you are here, you unknowns, underdogs and you *family!* I am glad we are here in this place as a family.

Name after name, Paul brings greetings, he lists attributes, and he shares his affection. He knows that this movement of God has a list with your name on it.