

“Highly Recommended”

One of the requirements of our preschool here at Hope is that parents fill out a form for the teachers titled “Getting to know your child”. Here is copy of that form my wife and I filled out for our daughter Phoebe who is in the 3/4 year old class. The questions are pretty normal I think. “What are your child’s favorite things to do?” “What are the most important things I need to know about your child?” “Does your child have fears such as loud noises, bugs, or animals?” And then there’s the question we parents love to answer—well at least the first part. And it’s “could you offer some strengths and weaknesses that you see in your child.” We like the strengths part because it’s our chance to kind of make our child’s case. We know them and we want the teachers to have documentation of what we know—mostly the good stuff of course—so they will have an idea of who they are welcoming into their classroom. So for Phoebe, my wife and I offered the following strengths: she’s strong; she’s curious; she has a great attention span and good problem solving abilities; she’s kind, happy, and seems quite smart! And yes, from our unique perspective, it’s all true! As Phoebe enters the new school year, she does so as being highly recommended by her parents.

I tell you this story about our Phoebe, because it reminded me of the Phoebe in today’s epistle lesson from Romans. But it was more than the same name that connected the two for me. It was this whole thing about being highly recommended. Of course the form we filled out for our Phoebe was about more than our recommendation. It was a tool the teacher could use to get a clearer picture of the student. But still, in reviewing that form, the language the parents used could certainly influence their expectations. And that's what it seemed like Paul was doing as he began the final chapter of Romans. He was using language to describe Phoebe in order to influence the Roman Christian’s expectations.

Let's look at the words again: *"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"*. I mean, this is some of the most highly recommending language Paul uses to describe any person, besides Jesus of course, in all of his letters. And this is important because he was very intentional about naming important people who helped him advance the mission of the gospel at the end of most of them. But Paul doesn't just name her, he commends her to the Christians in Rome, which means he vouches for her—he endorses her—he recommends her to them. And they are to welcome her in a way worthy of the saints and help her with whatever she needs. Why? Because she has been a patron—think along the lines of a financial sponsor— of many and to Paul as well. See what I mean about this language Paul uses to describe Phoebe and how it could influence expectations? I mean, wouldn't it be nice to have such a letter from our church leaders that we could just whip out when we visited a congregation. "Who am I? Read this and you tell me!"

All kidding aside, this woman was obviously a portrait of faith worthy of Paul's praise, but I have to be honest with you. The brief description we have of her in Romans chapter 16, which is the only place she is mentioned in the entire Bible, is not the easiest text to preach on. This is all we know about her. It sure sounds good, but just like how I only shared with you our answer to our daughter Phoebe's strengths, we are only getting the good stuff about this woman. But considering what Paul said about her and the position he gives her at the beginning of the chapter, I think it's safe to assume she was influential, but we must not be tempted to elevate her to some sort of Super-Christian status. Remember, it was Paul who wrote, *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."* (Gal. 3:28). And that unity of being one in Christ, I think, is really our connection to this text.

You see, as Christians, it's important for us to see that the places God has allowed us to be are the places we are to serve him. Some of us have the great privilege of being placed as the bearers of God's word in a very public and visible way. But the reality is most people in Christ's church, with the exception of a few, serve in the background. Think of the ones who were to welcome Phoebe and help her with whatever she needed. We don't hear about them. Much like we don't here about all the parents and other adult volunteers who show up to supervise lock-ins, go on confirmation retreats, or serve as confirmation guides to help support our ministry to children and youth. We don't really hear about those small groups who help people move or deliver meals to folks having a hard time. Nor do we hear about the people who simply pray for our called workers, our interns, and our staff every single day, or send them messages of affirmation. A lot of these people, and the countless others I didn't name, seem to go unnoticed, even though they put a lot of time and effort into supporting our ministry.

But remember the unity of being one in Christ? That's what connects us to the divine mission, which means this whole thing is as much about the people who work behind the scenes as it is about those in the spotlight. And Jesus makes this pretty clear in the last verse of our gospel reading today.

In wrapping up his direction to his disciples before sending them out, he reminds them *"whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward."* (Matt. 10:42). These are truly amazing words when you think about it. The mission of the church and the reward associated with that mission is just as much for those who pour the disciples' drinks as it is for them who are on the front lines. And the same is true today.

You know, I'm going to be honest with you about something. Most days it feels pretty good to be recognized in the church as someone on the front lines. I'm not going to deny that. I'm sure Phoebe felt that same way after she made her way to Rome. But to understand God's mission and how the church reflects that

mission, we must always remember and celebrate the unity of how it all gets done. The pastors, the DCE, the DCE interns, the vicar, the support staff, and the lay leadership can't do it all. Sometimes I think we try, but it's impossible. But with the help of those who work behind the scenes giving of their time; sharing their unique talents; and supporting the ministry with their financial gifts, together we make it happen.

And this is really important, because when you get down to what the church is all about and why people need it, it's not to tell people how to be better or to offer them tips on a more fulfilling life—they can find that anywhere. People need the church for Jesus— for his life, his death, his resurrection. And as highly recommended people, made that way only through our faith in him, he will use all of us to carry out his mission, so that more and more will believe in him. If you truly believe that, I guess the question now is how will you help? Amen.