

“V.L.P.’s”

Whoever heard of Onesiphorus! Or Ampliatus? Or Epaphroditus? Tryphaena? Tryphosa? Or Tertius? Phoebe? Andronicus? These sound more like diseases than *persons*! But these are people mentioned in the New Testament! They are referred to briefly - all we know about them is gotten from a sentence or a phrase.

These are just a few of the people who were part of the first century church, largely unknown to us, seemingly minor, unimportant figures. They pop up every now and then, and we usually skip over them because we have trouble pronouncing their names! Yet they are faithful, dedicated followers of Jesus who were important in the work of Christ.

Most of the time when we read or discuss the Bible we concentrate on the *VIP’s* – the Very Important Persons – the “big guns” of the faith - people like Moses, King David, Peter, Paul. But today let’s think about the significance of some of the *VLP’s* – Very Little People, and how they can instruct and inspire us! We have time to look at just a few. Turn to Romans, chapter 16.

The Book of Romans is a deep, theological letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Rome. At the end of the letter, Paul shifts from the topic of heavy duty doctrine to practical matters. He urges Roman believers to greet and welcome certain sisters and brothers in Christ.

For example, there is Phoebe. She is mentioned in Romans 16, verses 1 and 2. “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, 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.” Notice how he describes her, “For she has been a benefactor (helper) of many and of myself as well...”. She was a steady, reliable helper. Perhaps she had the spiritual gift of service, or of helps. Who knows how many times she must have been there for Paul, giving him practical aid in his life and ministry.

Then, there is ***Prisca (or Priscilla) and Aquila.*** “Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house” (Romans 16:3-5a). They are mentioned in several other places in the New Testament. From these references we learn that they moved a lot (lot many Americans today), that they opened their home for the church to meet there, demonstrating warm hospitality, and that they were lay people, tentmakers by trade. Furthermore, Paul says that they “risked their necks for my life” (vs. 4). Wow! Wouldn’t you love to know exactly what they did to put their lives on the line for Paul? Think about it: How many people would be willing to risk their necks for you?

And what about ***Andronicus and Junia.*** “Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was” (Romans 16:7). Paul calls them “countrymen” – “relatives” (New Revised Standard Version) – “fellow Jews” (New International Version). They were also in jail because they preached the gospel. Would you be willing to go to jail for the gospel? They were! Paul mentions that they were “prominent” among the apostles. When talking about the apostles, we probably have never mentioned them. Yet they were well known, outstanding leaders within the ranks of the apostles.

And they were even followers of Jesus before Paul was.

Then there's Ampliatus. “Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord” (Romans 16:8). “My beloved in the Lord.” This was a man who was a dear Christian friend. Who knows, maybe he was a good listener. Perhaps he was a calming influence on Paul’s volatile and mercurial personality! Ask yourself, how many people regard you as a dearly loved sister or brother in Christ?

How about Tryphaena and Tryphosa? “Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa” (Romans 16:12a). What do we know about them? That’s all the meager description we have. Do we even know if they were men or women? (Actually, they are 2 women). They are simply referred to as “those workers in the Lord.”

Here’s an interesting thing: the name Tryphaena means “dainty”, and the name Tryphosa means “delicate.” I suppose when they went to Boscov’s or Kohl’s to shop for a dress or top they probably had to shop in the “Juniors” or “Petite” department! Yet, when it says they are *workers* for the Lord, the word suggests working *to the point of exhaustion!*

Let's not forget Tertius. He is referenced in verse 22: “I Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord.” He’s the one who actually wrote the whole letter to the Romans (as Paul dictated it). Perhaps he was a scribe, or maybe he was schooled as a secretary. He used his talent and training for the Lord. Many believe Paul’s eyesight was bad. What a blessing to have someone willing to actually pen the letter for Paul.

There are other people like this mentioned in Romans 16, and other places in the Bible. For instance, ***Onesiphorus.*** Never heard of him? Look at 2 Timothy 1:16-18. “May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not afraid of my chain; when he arrived in Rome he eagerly searched for me and found me – may the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day! And you know very well how much service he rendered in Ephesus.”

The Bible is dotted with the names of Very Little People like these, who never made the big headlines, but who faithfully did their part in the Body of Christ to get the gospel out!

Highlighting these VLP’s should be good news for us, because ***most of us are Very Little People.*** You and I might be the “big man or woman on campus” in our own little plot of ground, known and valued in our family, our work, our social circle, or perhaps in our local church. But outside of that, our name is probably unknown. We are not famous Christians like Billy Graham, or Mother Teresa, or Charles Stanley, or Max Lucado, or Joyce Meyer. So, if our faith is worth its weight, it had better have some good news for the common person, the VLP’s of life.....and it does!

For one thing, there is good news that VLP’s are deeply loved by God. Anybody can stand taller and feel more important when they know they are loved. My first year of theological

seminary was at Wesley Theological Seminary, in Washington, D.C. Back in those days, most seminary students were men (now, it's often more women. I recently got a mailing from Lancaster Theological Seminary, from where I graduated, and it had a picture of the new graduating class. Almost all of the class members were women). But in my class there were something like 120 men, and only 3 or 4 females. One of the ladies was a single girl. To be honest, she was not very pretty at all. One of students among my circle of friends was a guy named Miles. Miles was kind of "different", a bit scatterbrained, but in a likeable, pleasant sort of way. Miles, too, was unmarried. It was springtime in Washington. (You know what's coming next!) They fell in love. Well, you never saw such a difference in two people! They blossomed more than all the flowering trees that spring in the nation's capitol. They stood 2 feet taller, and exuded an air of newfound confidence and importance! *They knew they were loved!*

God loves you with a love more deep.....and steady....and pure....than any lover's love! No matter how common, or mediocre, or unfit we think we are, we are loved with a divine, redeeming love. It's a love that when we feel defeated and discouraged can lift us up and renew us, when we feel unimportant and that nobody cares, reminds us, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you" (Jeremiah 1:5), when we have failed in the things that matter the most says to us, "You are forgiven in Christ", and when we lose our way and drift from God, can hear God "Come home, and let's begin again." *We VLP's are loved by a God with a love that is immeasurable, unfathomable!*

There is another reason why the gospel is good news for common men and women. ***It tells us that we common people can be used for a great purpose.*** All these people with funny names had a place in the fabric of the early church, and in the spread of the gospel in that first generation of Christians.

Most of us want to feel that our life counts for something, that there's a reason why we were put here on earth. (I talked about that Saturday night in our country gospel service. It's a reason why the book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, has sold 40 million copies. *We need to feel needed!*)

The first year I tried out for a Little League baseball team, I wasn't very good. Back then there weren't many teams, so not everybody got on a team. We practiced for a week or so, and then one night after we were done practicing, the manager got a couple of us aside, and said he had to begin to make cuts, to "get rid of dead wood", as he put it. (Isn't that a wonderful way to talk to little kids). I soon surmised, I was one of the pieces of "dead wood" that was to be cut. That news stabbed me like a knife. I felt like I wasn't needed - and I wasn't! (Fortunately, that didn't totally define my baseball experience - I went on to play on other teams, and even once made an all-star team!).

We all have to feel like we're needed for some purpose that's worth living for. ***God has tons of work to do in this world.*** Now you may be thinking, oh boy, here's comes the pitch to get more involved in church work. Well, our work in the church can be important. But the fact is, most of what God needs us for is *outside the church*. Wherever there is genuine human need, wherever people are hurting, that's an opportunity to partner with God in the healing of the world. Maybe

there is someone in our neighborhood who is lonely, or a child or an adult who needs an encouraging word. Wherever there's someone who doesn't know Jesus, and perhaps is living without hope, we can be used to share the story of Jesus. Wherever there's injustice – something in life that isn't fair or people getting the short end of the stick – God might need us to stand up for that person or group. We don't need to be a famous Very Important Person to join hands with God in bringing help and hope to some other person.

One other thing as we look at the VLP's listed in Romans 16 and elsewhere: ***Every ministry done in Christ's name is important.*** Phoebe is a “helper”. Ampliatus is a listening friend. Tryphaena and Tryphosa are hard workers in the church. Tertius writes letters. Prisca and Aquila were warm, hospitable hosts. Nothing spectacular. Humble, ordinary acts. But they were invaluable to those who benefitted from their acts of kindness and love.

A few years ago when we went to visit our daughter in South Carolina for a vacation our car broke down along route 95 in North Carolina. It just happened that a State Trooper was nearby and saw us. He immediately pulled up next to us along the road. He called a tow truck. And we had a nice ride with a friendly tow truck driver to a Toyota dealer in Fayetteville. A young lady named Brooks was at the desk at the Toyota dealership and in a pleasant manner went out of her way to get our car repaired and get us back on the road again the next day. I tell you, what these people did for Nancy and me in their simple acts of kindness was worth more than a hundred preachers preaching a hundred fine sermons!

God has way of using the simple tasks that ordinary people do to get His work done. Some years ago in my home church, Ross Street United Methodist in Lancaster, a retired member of the church was the church custodian. He wasn't paid very much, but he spent hours each week doing a conscientious job keeping that church building clean, because he loved that church, and it was a way of expressing his love for Christ.

God has way of multiplying our mundane gifts when we surrender them to Him. A pastor with rather ordinary gifts, but a very fruitful ministry, when asked about it said, “I have an extraordinary God.” I think about a devoted Christian man in my home church. He at times would preach and fill the pulpit, he visited people in their homes and the hospital, he counseled people in his job as a supervisor, and he was a wonderfully positive role model for me in my formative years as a new Christian. Yet, he was a very simple man, with only an 8th grade education

Thank God for “superstar” Christians! Christian VIP's in every time of history whose names are household words in the church. My life has been blessed by many of them. But the seeds of the Christian faith are sown anew and kept alive in every generation by the thousands and thousands and thousands of VLP's – unspectacular and largely unknown believers with very ordinary gifts. The Daves and the Marys and the Bobs and the Janes who are the unsung heroes of the faith. *Remember, when all is said and done, God calls us not to be famous, but faithful.*

Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr. Community United Methodist Church June 24, 2018

