

SERMON TITLE: "Mothers of the Church"
SERMON TEXT: Romans 16:1-16
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: May 8, 2022 (Mother's Day and UWF Sunday)

INTRODUCTION

The big news of this past week was the leak of the U.S. Supreme Court's draft decision on overturning Roe vs. Wade. No matter what you think about that, you might be interested to know that 60% of U.S. women who get abortions are already mothers to one or more children. Whether you approve of abortion or not, you can probably understand that those women who are also typically poor have quite often resorted to abortion because they don't want to further jeopardize the life of the children they already have.¹

In the history of humanity, motherhood has rarely been easy. Very often, mothers have to make seemingly impossible choices between short-term needs and long-term plans, between earning an income and spending time with their children, between physical and mental health, and sometimes between life and life. Pregnancies have often occurred in difficult situations and have involved huge sacrifices during the nine months of gestation, for the 18 or so years of child rearing, and for lifetimes of care and concern after that.

For sure, motherhood has involved a great deal of risk and heartache, along with significant joy, love, and dedication. Mothers are amazing people who have both sacrificed for us and blessed us. That's why we celebrate mothers today. And that's why I've chosen for us to consider the biblical text of Romans 16, which is jam-packed with the names of women who were giving leadership in the first decades of Christianity. I invite you to join me in being inspired by some rather amazing mothers of the church.

THE WOMEN OF ROMANS 16

The first woman we encounter in Romans 16:1 is **Phoebe**, who was a deacon of the church in the Greek port city of Cenchreae. Apparently Phoebe was a business woman who traveled for her work, and

she was with Paul where he was finishing up this letter. Paul was telling the Christians in Rome to welcome Phoebe and help her with whatever she would need. This implies that Paul was going to entrust his letter to Phoebe for her to take it to them. She was a leader in her local congregation, and she was an ambassador in Paul's regional ministry too. In case we might mistakenly think of her as merely a mail carrier, Paul describes Phoebe as a benefactor to many, including himself. That means Phoebe supported the Christian mission financially and initiated ministry through her significant social influence. Phoebe clearly was a mother who gave birth to the church.

If you're wondering why you don't remember hearing of Phoebe before, it could be because of the Bible translation you've been reading. In the New Revised Standard Version, Phoebe is clearly named as a "deacon." In other, more conservative translations, Phoebe's role in the church is downplayed to "servant" or "helper." But Bible scholars today, even ones from more patriarchal traditions, are starting to admit that "deacon" is the right word here. They also point out that, while there certainly were male deacons in the early church, the only deacon named in the New Testament was this woman Phoebe.

In verse three we are introduced to **Prisca** and Aquila, a wife and husband missionary team. Bible scholars point out to us that, four of the six times this pair is mentioned in Paul's letters, Prisca's name comes first. That ordering of names is unusual for that time in history, so it implies that Prisca (or Priscilla, as she is sometimes called) was the stronger leader of the two. Prisca and her husband were natives of Rome but had also done ministry in other cities of the Mediterranean region. As Paul indicates, the couple had "risked their necks for him," and, thus, he and others were grateful to them for their faithful work in Christ Jesus. Verse five informs us that Prisca and her husband were also the leaders of a small church that met in their house.

Verse six tells us about **Mary** who had "worked very hard among" the Christians in Rome. A person could work hard at hauling water, cooking food, washing clothes, or by telling the gospel story and inviting

others to salvation through Jesus. Whatever Mary's hard labors were, she definitely was a mother of the church who had advanced the ministry of Jesus Christ.

In verse seven, we're introduced to Andronicas and **Junia**. In previous times and in more-conservative Bible translations, Junia was misinterpreted to be a man. Traditionalists couldn't imagine that Paul would write these things about a woman, so they actually changed the spelling of her name to make it the masculine form. But today, Bible scholars know that Junia was a woman, and probably the wife of Andronicas. Paul explains that these two were his relatives and were in prison with him. They were "prominent among the apostles," and they were believers in Christ before Paul was. Wife Junia wasn't on the sidelines while her prominent husband was imprisoned. No, she too was "prominent among the apostles," and Junia also suffered imprisonment for her leadership in the Christian movement. The fact that Junia and her husband were in-Christ-before-Paul implies that this mother of the church may have even had a role in persuading Paul to become a follower of Jesus.

In verse 12, we read about **Tryphaena** and **Tryphosa** who were also described as "workers in the Lord." These two women could have been sisters or friends. In that same verse, Paul speaks of **Persis**, another woman who had "worked hard in the Lord." Again, we don't know if these hardworking women were teaching and preaching, organizing gatherings, or shopping for groceries—but whatever they were doing—through their labors, these mothers of the church nurtured and developed the Christian congregations in Rome.

In verse 13, Paul asks the Roman Christians to greet **Rufus' mother** who had been like a mother to Paul also. No doubt that mother of the church served her family and Christian friends through hospitality in her home that involved cooking and cleaning. But she probably also helped sing the hymns of worship and taught the children and others the stories of Jesus.

In verse 15, Paul lifts up two more women, **Julia** and the **sister of Nereus**. Some Bible scholars speculate that Nereus and his sister might have been the grown, or nearly-grown children of Julia and her

husband Philologus and that they, together as a family, hosted a small congregation of Christians in their home. If so, Julia and her daughter would have been leaders in their house church, doing all the things necessary to make worship happen and causing faith to grow.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you are getting the point. In the earliest decades of Christianity, there were lots of women who were playing leading roles in the church. They were organizing congregations in their houses and communities, and they were sharing faith in distant cities. They were early believers who brought others into salvation through Jesus Christ. Through their witness and hospitality, they helped convert the great missionary Paul, and they encouraged and supported his ministry throughout the Mediterranean region. Two thousand years' worth of Christianity is the result of their dedication and service. Thank goodness they weren't shrinking violets! These women who worked hard as co-laborers with Paul and as a prominent apostle were the mothers who gave birth to the church.

MOTHERS OF THE CHURCH TODAY

Of course, such recognition of the past clearly leads us to acknowledge the women who are mothers of the church today. Among us in our First United Methodist congregation are women who are giving leadership as greeters, ushers, liturgists, song leaders, and even as the preacher. We have women who are mothers of the church by offering faithful prayers for the sick, by sending cards to shut-ins, by teaching classes, by leading United Women in Faith meetings, and by leading and serving on our many church committees. We also have mothers of the church who serve Christ through their jobs in the community, where they labor with expertise, diligence, and ethics. And we have mothers of the church who nurture their own families and provide a Christian witness to children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren.

Maybe there's another lesson we can learn from Paul's list of mothers of the church. He doesn't spell it out here in Romans 16, but—throughout his entire letter to the Romans—Paul is making the case that Jewish and Gentile Christians need to get along with each other. In chapter after chapter, Paul makes

the case that God’s salvation isn’t just for the Jewish people of the law, but also for the Gentile people who are brought into the fold through grace.

Of course, the devil is always in the details, right? When people who hold very different values and traditions collide, how can people love one another and worship together? Greeting each other with warmth and gratitude is a good beginning. The mothers of the church listed in Romans 16 were all working that out in their ministries, and Paul hoped that others would express that kind of affection and helpfulness to those leaders of the church, as well.

Maybe we mothers of the church today can help carry this message forward too. Maybe we—like Phoebe, Prisca, Mary, Junia, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis, the mother of Rufus, Julia, and the sister of Nereus—can give life to the church through our willingness to get hung up less on former traditions and laws and embrace the salvation that is available to all of us through the forgiving mercy of Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

I’m going to conclude this sermon by sharing some words someone sent me in an email this week.

The email said,

If you are a single mother, a working mother, a mother far from home, a military mother, a stay-at-home mother, a young mother, an old mother, an adoptive mother, a mother who’s lost a child, or a mother who’s raising your child with two mothers—thank you! We see you, and our lives are better with you! You know, no mother is just a mother. Mothers can be activists, homemakers, creatives, professionals, travelers, athletes, craftswomen, and political leaders.

Yes, that’s right. And I would add that women of every type can also be confident leaders as mothers of the church.

¹From Center for Disease Control & Prevention, 2019, as reported at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/12/14/upshot/who-gets-abortion-in-america.html>

²Beth Allison Barr, April 7, 2021, <https://baptistnews.com/article/i-knew-the-truth-about-women-in-the-bible-and-i-stayed-silent#.YnZ5AujMKUk> .