

**ORDINARY PEOPLE:
THE MOTHER OF RUFUS**

Romans 16:13

Mark 15:21-24

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, August 5, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, as the final sermon in a summer sermon series entitled “Ordinary People.”

Mark 15:21-24

They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

Romans 16:13

Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also.

Prayer: May whoever reads the story of ordinary people in scripture be led to contemplate from what depths we must cry out to you, and thus, may we be led to cry out. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen. (Based on Augustine)

I.

In this final sermon I am preaching in this summer series on ordinary but obscure characters in the Bible, we turn to the most obscure character of all: “the mother of Rufus.” Here is what we know about her from the text of scripture.

In the final chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans, which contains the longest farewell in the New Testament, Paul lists twenty-nine people who have been involved in the church at Rome. We did not read them all, but they appear in Chapter 16.

- Paul expresses affection for these twenty-nine, and gratitude for their friendship, their faith, their role in the church.
- Paul refers to 27 of these 29 by name; yet two are not named: the sister of Nereus and the mother of Rufus.
- Of the latter, Paul writes: “*Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother – a mother to me also.*”

What this reference reveals to us is this:

- In the church at Rome, there was a man named Rufus.
- Paul believed that Rufus was “chosen in the Lord.”
- Rufus’ mother was also a part of the church.
- And she had in some way served as a maternal presence in Paul’s life – “a mother to me also.”

From this set of “knowns,” I want us to branch out into other references in the New Testament concerning the family of Rufus and his mother, and then turn to what Rufus’ mother may have meant to Paul.

II.

When we do detective work around the family of Rufus and his mother, we begin to encounter a tragic division that appears to have arisen within the family.

While the mother of Rufus appears nowhere else in the Bible, Rufus is mentioned at one other place in scripture.¹ If you will recall, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, when Jesus is sentenced to death, Roman soldiers lead him outside Jerusalem to be crucified. It was the custom in that day for the condemned criminal to carry across his shoulders the cross-bar of the cross on which he would soon be crucified. Likely because Jesus was already so weakened by the torture he had endured, he is unable to carry the crossbar. A man named Simon of Cyrene is coming into Jerusalem from the countryside. The soldiers compel him to carry the crossbar in Jesus’ stead, and Simon obeys their order.²

While Matthew, Mark, and Luke all write this detail, when Mark mentions Simon of Cyrene, he adds: “the father of Alexander and Rufus.”

If this is the same Rufus whose mother appears at the end of Paul’s letter, then the mother of Rufus was married to the man compelled by Roman soldiers to carry the cross of Christ to his crucifixion.

Now it is entirely possible, that, like the centurion at the cross we saw three Sundays ago, Simon of Cyrene becomes a “follower” of Christ – indeed converts to Christianity – through the small part he plays in Christ’s death.³ On the other hand, it is possible that Simon – like the other Roman soldiers involved – is more a servant of the crucifixion than someone converted by it. His carrying the cross of Christ may simply be an act of obedience to soldiers in what is essentially a police state. For Simon, the crucifixion of Christ may have been no more significant than the dozens of public crucifixions he would have witnessed as a resident of Jerusalem in that day and time.

In any event, in the twenty or more years between the death of Christ and the writing of Paul’s letter to the Romans, it appears that both the wife of Simon and their son Rufus have become significant followers of Christ and active supporters of the apostle Paul in his carrying to news of Christ’s death and resurrection from its base into Judaism to the Greco-Roman world.

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But what about the other son, Alexander?

Unlike Rufus or his mother, a person *named* Alexander is mentioned four other times in the New Testament. But in at least three of these, Alexander is depicted as either critical of Paul, opposed to the faith Paul represents, or trying to undermine Paul.⁴

¹ Mark 15:21.

² Matthew 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26.

³ Luke even uses the verb “followed after” to describe Simon’s action in carrying the cross.

⁴ When Peter and John are on trial in Jerusalem, Alexander is a leading priest there, one who tries to silence their preaching (Acts 4:1-23). When Paul is preaching and teaching at Ephesus, Alexander is involved in a riot that breaks out. Alexander calls for calm, but it remains unclear whether he is standing with or against the faith Paul professes (Acts 19:33). Paul later writes of Alexander that he was one who made “shipwreck of his faith” and who “blasphemed God” (I Timothy 1:19-20). And near the end of Paul’s life, in one

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So far this sermon has had a lot of forensic investigation: CSI: Westminster. But a possibility that emerges from it is this:

At some point after Simon of Cyrene carried the crossbar of Christ to the place Christ was to be crucified:

- His wife became a follower of Christ active with and assuming a leadership role with the apostle Paul
- His son Rufus likewise became a follower of Christ also active with Paul
- But his other son Alexander became an active opponent of the Christian faith and tried to stamp it out
- While at best Simon's own role is unclear.

The bottom line is that it is clearly within the realm of possibility that the four members of this family are deeply divided: Rufus and his mother devoted followers of Christ active in the early church; Simon and Alexander, opponents. It is possible that this is a family in which members are pitted against one another, living in their own moral, cultural and religious universes: Christian vs. pagan, kingdom of Christ vs. kingdom of Caesar, Rome and Athens vs. Jerusalem. Paul thanks Rufus and his mother, warns Timothy about Alexander, and makes no mention of Simon. This is a family deeply divided.

III.

Does that sound at all familiar?

In our nation, we are fifty years past the summer of 1968. Those of us who were alive then and are alive now have likely entertained the question in recent years whether or not we are as divided as a nation today as we were then. Those were divided times, with cities burning, campuses shut down, assassinations and riots.

The effect of those divisions was intense within families:

- College students – if they came home for the holidays – often hurled invective over turkey and dressing, invective returned by angry and defensive parents.
- A pastor who served in the Norfolk area told me of a funeral he conducted in which a military spouse refused the flag offered her at the graveside out of her opposition to the war in which her husband had died.
- Parents were divided against children, sibling against sibling, husbands against wives and wives against husbands over fundamental issues of war and peace, sexuality, the role of the family and men and women within it, the meaning of patriotism, the existence and presence, whether or not God was worthy of belief.

Whether our country is more or less divided now is in some sense academic, for we are divided *enough* to know that many families – nuclear or extended – can barely speak to one another about certain topics. Many households, many families, even many marriages know what it is like to have Alexander and Simon on one side, Rufus and his mother on another.

of the most overlooked passages of the New Testament, Paul writes Timothy: *“Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; The Lord will pay him back for his deeds. You also must beware of him, For he is opposed to our message.” (II Timothy 4:14).*

What I am moved by the imaginative reconstruction of the family of Simon, his wife, their sons Rufus and Alexander is this: In Biblical times people were often, like us, divided from those they loved over fundamental issues of faith and moral belief. We are not the first generation to struggle with those whom we love over significant matters in which differences appear to be barely reconcilable if reconcilable at all.

Even Jesus himself once said:

*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth;
I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.
For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
and one's foes will be members of one's own household.*⁵

Perhaps similar this memory came to the mother of Rufus when, alone one night in her bed, she realizes the cost she had paid and the losses she had endured because she came to follow the one whose cross her husband had carried.

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This reconstruction of the family of Rufus and his mother I have offered does not prescribe what we are to do when we are in a family that is divided over fundamental issues of faith and moral belief. Each family, every individual, has to navigate those differences to the best of their ability and cognizant of the situation they at hand.

But this reconstruction can remind us that in a fallen and divided world – where even Adam and Eve early on experienced rift and mutual finger pointing⁶ – the fact that our faith and its scriptures acknowledge our propensity for division can be reassuring, helpful, and perhaps even healing. It is not as if God is not used to seeing his creation and creatures in conflict. God does not avert his eyes when we sit across the table from those we love with arms folded across our chests. It can be a source of comfort and perspective – perhaps even the beginning of reconciliation – to know that God sees our differences and the scriptures acknowledge them.

IV.

The division within the family of Rufus and his mother exposes a tragic dimension to human nature. But a beautiful part comes through the story as well, particularly for the mother of Rufus. We encounter this beauty in the words of Paul's farewell:

"...greet [Rufus'] mother, a mother to me also."

We know very little about the apostle Paul's family life. We know that as a young man he was Jewish, highly educated by one of the leading rabbis of his day, a precocious leader within the Jewish community. Given the importance of family within Judaism, we can deduce that his family of origin was strong, faithful, observant.⁷

But the vision of the risen Christ Paul encountered on the Road to Damascus⁸ had turned him from someone who tried to squelch the reform movement Jesus had led within Judaism into one who took the news of Jesus' death and resurrection from Judaism into the Greco-Roman world. More than any single human being, Paul is

⁵ Matthew 10:34-36.

⁶ Genesis 3:12-13.

⁷ Galatians 1:11-24.

⁸ Acts 9:1-19.

responsible for Christianity becoming a world religion, rather than a small sect within Judaism. Had Paul not been successful, we would not be sitting here today.

But in all of his writings, Paul never mentions the family from which he came and likely left behind: mother, father, siblings, perhaps even spouse. No mention.

But near the end of his life, in the last chapter of his letter to the Romans, when Paul gives thanks for the contributions of 29 people to the work of the early church and the expansion of Christianity, among those he thanks is “the mother of Rufus”; and then he adds: she was “a mother to me also.”

In the mother of Rufus, Paul had a surrogate mother, a metaphorical mother, a spiritual mother, a mother in the faith. “A mother to me also,” he said.

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Throughout my life, I have had mentors and teachers and people I have looked up to – some women, some men – mostly but not all positive. I am not sure I would go so far as to say that any one person has been “a father in the faith” or “a mother in the faith” to me, or simply a metaphorical father or mother in life for that matter.

But I have seen such relationships in the church and outside the church: relationships which are so healthy and in which people are so close that they describe the other as a “father” or “mother,” “sister” or “brother,” “child.” The Bible is replete with such relationships:

- Eli and Samuel⁹
- Jonathon and David¹⁰
- Elijah and Elisha¹¹
- Elizabeth and Mary¹²
- Paul and Onesimus¹³
- Jesus and the Beloved Disciple.¹⁴

When these relationships happen:

- They are beautiful
- They are lovely
- They are life giving
- They are a gift from God.

If Rufus was “chosen in the Lord” as Paul says, then I believe the mother of Rufus was “chosen in the Lord” to be a maternal presence in Paul’s life.

If you currently have such a relationship, if you have had one, if you think you might be on the verge of one, I encourage you to give thanks for what you have or have had and do not hold back on what might develop, at least until you have a reason to hold back.

⁹ I Samuel 2 and 3.

¹⁰ I Samuel 18:1-9.

¹¹ I Kings 19; II Kings 2.

¹² Luke 1:39-45.

¹³ Philemon 8-16.

¹⁴ John 21:1-24.

The relationship Paul had with the mother of Rufus may have taken some edge off the volatility and anger in some of his writings, may have given him a greater understanding about the role women could play in the church, may have given him insight which helped him become the leader he was.

Most of all, the mother of Rufus may have filled the hole undoubtedly left in his heart when, like her, his decision to follow Christ left a deep hole in the family which had been so important to his learning and upbringing.

Amen.