

Read also Isaiah 43:5-13. Check out the service at www.fpcd.org.

Janet tells the story of the church in about 55 A.D. Paul, the writer, greets twenty-six people—believers; vibrant Christians connected with the church in Rome, people who threw their all into their faith.

It was a new thing—only about twenty years since Jesus had been crucified and been raised. People were living who knew Jesus. The New Testament was just in its writing stage, though no one knew it. It was a grassroots movement—no big corporate, institutional, or government enterprise; just people who loved Jesus Christ and also loved one another.

They were Romans, Greeks, and Jews. It was a diverse church. That would have not seemed possible. None of those people would have associated with each other outside of Jesus Christ. Jesus changes so much. Paul was focused on that new unity. “It doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us,” he writes. (Col 3:11)

Paul loves these people. You could tell in Janet's storytelling.

Here is how he described these earliest believers:

- People famous for generous hospitality
- A key representative of the church
- Helper
- Put their lives on the line for Christ and for Paul
- A tried and true veteran in following Christ
- Hold a church in their home
- First to believe in Asia – a Greek, Epaphroditus emigrated from Ephesus and was likely evangelized by the Jews Aquila and Priscilla. They had been in the group expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius for causing a ruckus among Roman Jews.
- There are slaves, freedmen, freedwomen, women
- They were families and extended families
- There were eight women, all hard workers and leaders
 - One, Rufus's mother, treated Paul like a son
 - Two women he called diligent in serving the Master
- These people were beloved.
- They were good friends.
- They were chosen in the Lord.

Paul had great affection for these people and felt a true partnership with them.

The church would not have survived without their passionate faith. We are here because of them. They stood up for their faith to reach out to the entire community, and their diversity confirms it. Are we reaching this community in the same way?

On a recent trip, we went to Berlin. Berlin hosts a Jewish Museum. It is spectacular because its focus is centered on German Jewish culture. The exhibits show what the Jewish people have

contributed to its culture through their expertise in science and mathematics, their commitment to education, religion, the arts, the structure of their families, and so forth. It also shows the void that is left when a people is removed from a society.

So what makes the museum so great is the contrast of the contribution Jewish people made in German society and the void that resulted from their expulsion and extermination. That contrast allows you see who they were.

What do Christians add to a culture? What is our impact on our community?

I was raised Presbyterian so in the 1970s as a young college student on Long Island, I decided to visit First Pres. Smithtown. The church was started in 1675 by settler Richard Smith; just fifty-five years after the first Pilgrims or Separatists arrived and formed the Plymouth Colony. Mr. Smith gave the land and built the church in the town he had founded. In 1750, because the town location shifted, Smith's descendants named Obidiah and Epenetus Smith, donated land and money so that the church building could be moved to the center of town to 'promote the gospel of Christ to their brethren and townspeople.'¹

Notice the man's name—"Epenetus." He was named after Epenetus in Romans 16. Paul calls him "beloved friend and the first convert in Asia." (Ro 16:5)

In 1750, tensions were building up toward the American Revolution. The Battle of Long Island had been fought unsuccessfully, and pastors helped the townspeople navigate the military rule won by the British, whose troops were confiscating people's property, including a great deal of lumber from their church! But the congregation continued to worship. Their pastor, Rev. Joshua Hartt, preached a sermon that only Sovereign God had the right to rule men, and for the British not to interfere with free men who had settled this country to serve God. He was fired on by British soldiers while preaching (they missed), and he was imprisoned numerous times because of his inflammatory sermons, like Paul and Andronicus and Junia who were also imprisoned for their faith.

First Presbyterian Church Smithtown had eighteen members in 1797. They wrote this statement:
"We do this day, in the presence of the Great Eternal and Holy God, Solemnly take the Lord Jehovah, Father, Son and Holy Ghost to be our God, and we do desire to give up ourselves Souls and Body to be at His disposal. Yielding ourselves to His service as willing and obedient Subjects . . ."

They were impacting their community with this devotion.

Who are you giving yourselves up to? Who or what are you serving? Non-passionate faith makes little impact.

By 1810 the congregation had grown to twenty-seven. These members were comprised of men, women, and several freed slaves. So they were a multi-ethnic congregation just like Paul's church in Rome.

¹ For all references about this church see "Church history" at <http://www.fpcsmithtown.net>, accessed August 16, 2016.

The church built its present sanctuary in 1825 and it remains today. For 300 years it has never ceased to be a church, although if you read its history, it had many ups and down due mostly to internal dissension, external attacks, and difficult current events. Nevertheless, the Lord helped them to stand, to overcome Satan's power to divide and they stand as a vibrant congregation today at 500+ members, with an open door policy to people in the community and the mission to help their people develop a deep personal faith.

So like the First Church of Rome, personal piety and passionate faith, and an outwardly focused community view, makes them healthy as they persevere in love toward one another.

Like the First Presbyterian Church in Duncanville.

So I commend to you Jaime, a deacon at our church, a leader who has a desire to grow deeper, along with Lorraine and his children who faithfully support this church each week. They were brought to the Lord by neighbors Tom and Lois, members of FPCD. Embrace your other deacons, Diane, Doris, Margaret, Joan, and Edelmira, who serve tirelessly, reaching out to people within and outside the congregation when they hear of a hurt or a need.

Embrace Bill and Vangie who risked their lives on the mission field when Vangie had a difficult delivery. They served in many ways, later pastoring a church in south Texas.

Embrace Carol who lived with people in Nigeria and continues to write books to help others there. Greet by email, Paul and Jen, Carlos and Caryn, the Liddles and the Walters families all who tirelessly work around the world for the Word. And embrace Paul and Claudia who have returned here from the mission field and Sam and Charlotte. Embrace Carol, who loves the Word. Embrace Adelmo who reaches out with Spanish ministry. Embrace Marlene and Leo who served the Lord on the mission field. Greet also Darrell and Sharon, who invite neighbors to Bible studies they hold in their home just like the early church.

Embrace Jeff who faithfully ministers and his wife Nyadia who leads us in Spirit-filled worship. Greet Steve and Marna—true leaders in music, teaching, and leadership, as are Gary and Linda. Embrace the Everetts, and greet Grant, who has a heart for missions and who all love to sing for the Lord. And embrace beloved Candice, another singer who, along with her husband Gary, generously serves and gives.

Embrace Eddie as he teaches, Darlene who serves tirelessly, and Billie who faithfully calls her family to love Jesus. Embrace David and Sandy who experienced a miracle when the twins were born healthy after a difficult pregnancy. Greet Christy and Glen, and Bob who loves this church and comes early every morning to water the plants.

Greet Angel, Logan, Jimmy, Brandon, and Jason who serve by leading worship every month, under the guidance of Lori and Ross who ensure that they are taught—and greet our pre-teens, who can't wait to come to their youth night each week. Embrace Wanda, Kent and Charlie who strongly support FPCD.

Lovingly greet the Reeds who often cook for the entire congregation and lovingly minister to their extended family. Greet Armelia and Eugene, who send homebound people sermons every week and Larry who will do anything you ask him to do for this church. And embrace Roy and Wendy and Donna, who deeply believe in prayer. Embrace Brittany who is a walking answer to prayer. Embrace Jack, Gwen and Dub, Lucy and Sean who faithfully love the Lord and use their gifts to teach God's grace to their kids and grandkids. Dub and Joan go into the community and tell Bible stories to bless many with God's story.

Embrace your elders, Dub, Dick, Anna, Sharon, Sean, and Clerk Jocelyn, who are tried and true leaders. Greet Nancy and Connie for their email prayer ministry. Embrace Sandra who loves the Lord and Irving and Peggy who center their family around this church. Greet Susan who serves this church faithfully. Embrace Albert who is here early every Sunday before anyone else. Embrace Scott and Kathleen who have been benefactors to many, and blessed me greatly in the faith.

Embrace your staff who are all your coworkers in Christ. Embrace Janet and Jim because they are tried and true veterans of the faith and support their ministry because they need you.

Can you see the power of the gospel? Let us not be hindered by dissensions or divisions but continue the link of unity with those who have gone before us. Let passionate faith be your vision and it will overcome all the hindrances Satan throws our way. Let us write, "We do desire to give up ourselves Souls and body to be at His disposal." This will be our witness to the unifying power of Christ Jesus.

AMEN