Do We Know Junia?

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Y. Joe Kim

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, 2 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. 3 Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, 4 and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. 5 Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. 6 Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you. 7 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 16:1-7)

1. Lights and the Dove Window

Last week, a woman sent me an email and asked if I could send some photos of the lights and the dove window in our sanctuary. She said that her ancestor was Isaac Keith, the founder of Keith Car. The woman was doing some research and read about Keith's history at Swift Memorial UMC. She is fascinated to learn that the lights housed in our sanctuary were made from railway car wheels. She also learned her grandmother (Nancy Ashley, now deceased) and her siblings donated a dove window in E.S.S. Keith's memory. Here are the photos that I sent her. This email was a reminder of the difference that someone made in our church.

2. Faithful Disciples in the Roman Congregation

In Romans chapter 16, the apostle Paul sends personal greetings to some two dozen members of the Roman congregation. When we read this chapter, we get the clear sense that Paul is sending a letter to people that he has met previously. Since Paul had never been to the Roman Church when he wrote this letter, these Christians were likely people that Paul met elsewhere during his missionary journeys.

Paul tells his readers who these people are, their relationship with Paul, and what they have done for him and others in the early church. Paul gives thanks to their help and faithfulness. We aren't able to go into detail about each person, but this morning, I would like to talk about Junia, found in verse 7.

You might ask, why is Junia important? Throughout my time as a pastor, I haven't spent any significant amount of time looking into Junia because I did not know about the significance of this person. About two weeks ago, I read an article about a United Methodist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. This church's name is Saint Junia and got planted a few years ago.

The church named it Saint Junia to remember that God calls all people to leadership and service, regardless of their backgrounds, age, ethnicity, gender, or social status. The congregants find a significant reminder in the life of Junia. I would like to share some of what I've learned about Junia this morning and how this person may serve as a role model in our faith journey.

The name of Junia only appears in Romans 16:7. The Bible does not give us any more information about Junia other than in this reference. The two important questions that have come up over time regarding Junia are the gender and the status as an apostle.

In terms of gender, some have said that Junia is a woman, while others argue that Junia is a man. The argument often comes up in regards to having a female leader as a noted apostle. We don't have clear evidence for either argument, but there are some clues that give us a better sense of who Junia may have been.

In early Christianity, it was customary for the followers of Jesus to assemble together in the homes of a believer. Today we call these house churches. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 16:19, "***The churches of Asia send greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, greet you warmly in the Lord***." Prisca and Aquila appear here in Romans 16:3-4. In the Letter to the Romans, Paul put Prisca first, probably because she is more influential than Aquila. Prisca was the wife of Aquila.

According to Acts 18:2 & 3, the couple had moved to Corinth when Jews living in Rome were expelled by the emperor. In Corinth, Prisca and Aquila met Paul and invited him to live with them. Paul is grateful for their hospitality and for risking their lives for Paul. Paul also says "all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them" (16:4).

Paul sends the same greeting to Andronicus and Junia as he sends it to Aquila and Prisca. In verse 7, Paul says, "***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***."

This parallel gives us a good sense that Prisca and Junia were both women and the wives of their respective husbands. Origen of Alexandria (c.185-253/54), the earliest commentator and other early fathers took Junia to be feminine. Luther, however, in his German translation of 1552 translated Junia as the masculine. The Revised Version of the Bible published in 1881, also used "Junias" as a male instead of Junia.

Some traditions in church have hindered the role of women in the church. However, when we look at today's scripture, we see that women, from the beginning of the church, functioned as leaders, Junia being one of them.

3. A Female Apostle

The second important question that comes up regarding Junia is often whether or not Junia was an apostle. Paul says, "they (Andronicus and Junia) are prominent among the apostles." Who were the apostles? According to Acts 1:22, someone who had been with Jesus from the time of his baptism until his resurrection was qualified to be his apostle. 1 Corinthians 15:6 says, "***Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died."*** We don't know exactly to whom Jesus appeared in the crowd of five hundred, but we do know that there were both men and women in the 500. Junia could be one of the people Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 15.

Junia could be a member of the larger group commonly called "the apostles," which included others like Silas and Timothy. The reference to "apostles" here could also mean missionaries or evangelists such as Aquila and Prisca, and Apollos. Outside of the specific standing of Junia, we know that Junia was an important part of the Roman church and was considered a leader in the early church.

4. Using God's Gifts

What do we learn from the life of Junia? We learn that God uses everyone to love and care for his people. When a little boy shared his five loaves of bread and two fish, five thousand men plus women and children were fed. Junia, like the many other apostles, served the early church so that others would hear the good news of Jesus Christ through her.

Can we find a follower of Jesus Christ like Junia today? The name of our church is Swift Memorial. As you may know, our church got its name from Nathanial Swift. The first church was built on the land that was donated from the Swift family in 1828. Nathanial Swift's grandson, Gustav, founder of a meat packing house in Chicago, donated $10,000 towards the $25,000 needed to complete this stone building. Last year, descendants of the Swift family, Ed and his wife Clare stopped by and told us that his ancestors' tombs are here in Sandwich. I visited the location last week and found these tombstones.

I learned that Nathanial Swift was born in 1768 and died 1843 at the age of 75. His wife's name was Betsey. She died in 1835 at 65. We do not know much about Betsey, but I am sure that she would have shared Nathanial's love and faithfulness for Jesus. I hope we remember the Swift family and the many other people who have shared their love and faithfulness in our church when we celebrate our church's anniversary. I praise the Lord for calling them to use for the kingdom of God in Sagamore Beach.

5. Bezalel and Oholiab

In Exodus 31:2-6, today's Old Testament lesson, the Lord says to Moses, "***See, I have called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of***

Judah: [3] and I have filled him with divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, [4] to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, [5] in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft. [6] Moreover, I have appointed with him Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan; and I have given skill to all the skillful, so that they may make all that I have commanded you."

The Israelites were anxious to reach the Promised Land after leaving Egypt. They wanted to get there as soon as possible. But God asks Moses to build the Tent of Meeting, and the ark of the Testimony with the atonement cover on it, and all the other furnishings of the tent. God gives Moses the size and specifications of each item. Moses would wonder how and who would do what God wants them to do. This passage tells us that God had already chosen who would do these things. God chose Bezalel as the key architect and Oholiab would be his assistant. God always has a plan for His purpose.

6. Conclusion

Junia would have been one of the founders of the Roman congregation. She was well known because of her significant contribution to the Roman church. She was well respected by the apostle Paul and had become a follower of Christ before Paul. The life of Junia reminds us that God uses everyone to be his hands and his feet in the world. Women specifically played key roles in the planting of the early churches and the expansion of the Kingdom of God. These early church leaders hosted church in their homes, funded the early church, and ministered to women, widow, the sick, and children.

7. Application

Paul uses the metaphor of the human body for the church. Each person belongs to one body. Do you know how many cells we have in our body? According to recent research, an average person has about 30 trillion cells. There are about 200 different types of cells in the body. Each type of cell performs a unique and special function.

Some say that there are three kinds of people in this world: people who make it happen, people who watch what happens, and people who wonder what happened. What kinds of people do we want to be? As far as I am concerned, I want to be a person who makes it happen. I hope each of us including our children has unique and special mission in our church.

I am grateful we have a scripture reader in addition to the liturgist. Next Sunday we will have messy church. Messy church focuses on intergenerational worship. We hope everyone actively participates in our worship service and in ministry and mission. We are on this earth for a limited time. While we are here, we are called to make a difference and to share the love of Christ in this world. Would you be a Junia in our church for the kingdom of God? Amen.