

Sermon: Faith in Footnotes

Year A, Proper 23

[Isaiah 25:1-9](#); [Psalm 23](#); [Philippians 4:1-9](#); [Matthew 22:1-14](#)

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I'd like to ask you all a favor. Would you mind pulling out your pew Bibles and turning to page 925? Find the start of Romans 16.

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.

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. Greet my beloved Epaphroditus who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you. 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.

Do you see that Junia has a footnote? It's the small letter "p" and at the bottom it says "Or Junias; other ancient authorities read Julia". What it doesn't say is that "Junias" is a man's name.

We all know that until Gutenberg fired up his printing press in 1454 or 1455, new Bibles were made by hand copying existing ones. There's always been a feeling that the closer an edition was to the time of Jesus, the less editing there had been to what Jesus really said, and fewer mistakes got perpetuated over the years, even though we knew we couldn't go all the way back. So scholars spent years building family trees of which Bible was copied from which. They had been doing that kind of work all along, but the modern, more scientific studies got started in 1674. So we've been at it awhile.

So we know, we *know*, that the oldest sources and the best sources, the ones with the fewest errors, say "Junia", the woman's name. And we know that for hundreds of years, lots of Bibles said "Junias", the man's name. We have a pretty good hypothesis of why that was so. Because the church was led by men, the scholars were men, the legal, social and political power structures were set up by and benefitted men. In referring to today's reading from Philippians 4, an Austrian scholar wrote "that Paul's entreaties to Euodia and Syntyche in Phil. 4:2 must be symbolic references to two 'parties' in Philippi because a literal interpretation, i.e. entreaties to two women, would give the passage a 'strange character'."¹ That was written in 1874, which is 135 years ago to be sure. But when that was written we'd been at this Christianity thing for 1900 years, and it wasn't that long ago.

So here's what a scholar, a woman scholar, did.² She made a list of six women church leaders from the Pauline letters, including today's Euodia and Syntyche. She looked at the cities they were from, determined that all were culturally Roman. So we were looking at the same culture. Then she looked at women's roles in Roman families, Roman society and Roman politics in the

¹ Wendy J. Cotter, "Women's Authority Roles in Paul's Churches: Countercultural or Conventional?." *Novum Testamentum* 36, no. 4 (October 1994), 350.

² Cotter, 350-372.

period around when Paul was working. She found that Roman women were far more equal to men in Roman families and in society than Greek women, but not really a part of Roman politics. So were these female church leaders counter-cultural rebels and Paul was overthrowing the world order? Or were they building on something that was there already?

She pointed out that if you look at the churches as based in the home and as societies of men and women, women in a leadership role was not unheard of and quite often they provided leadership and financial support as equals with. But the Greek word that we translate as church, *ἐκκλησία*, was understood as an assembly of the citizens of a 'free' city.³ So *ἐκκλησία* is more than a household or a social gathering.⁴ It adds a note of civic seriousness to the assembly.⁵ So these Christian organizations of Paul were 'civic' or 'political' entities, however pious they also were.⁶ To have women leading those kinds of organizations was unusual.

Paul was pretty explicit that these churches, these *ἐκκλησίαις*, were not something temporary, but were the first permanent steps towards the kingdom of God.⁷ It mattered that they worked well, because they were going to work together for all time. It mattered that Euodia and Syntyche were no longer in conflict, because these communities were the home of God's peace. And it mattered to Paul that he not take sides and that the community find a way to settle the dispute. Paul knew there were going to be disputes and hurt feelings in the kingdom of God. As long as there were humans in them, there was going to be conflict. But the conflict could be resolved by the community, relying on the grace and leadership of their relationship with Christ Jesus.

Wendy Cotter's article is a nice piece of scholarship. Well researched, good sources, plenty of footnotes. It was published in 1994. Much of the analysis she cites is relatively recent (1905-1991). But the source of much of her information about women in Rome comes from contemporary Roman authors or from inscriptions on buildings, both of which have been available in collections from at least as far back at 1674 when we started building family trees for the Bible. It just took until 1994 for someone to do the work.

Why? Today's reading says, *Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.* (Philippians 4:8). Why does it take 2,000 years of Christianity before someone asks, "hey, how weird would it be to have one of Paul's churches led by women?"? Because asking that question seems to me to touch on truth, honor, justice, purity, pleasure, commendation, excellence and praise. All the stuff we're supposed to think about. But we don't. Or we didn't.

Until we get some critical number of women leaders, not just in churches, but in academia, in research. And more than that. In political parties and corporations and the military and the arts. I graduated from a women's college in 1988. I was in at least the second generation of feminists and if you go back to Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B Anthony, I was in more like the sixth or seventh generation of people advocating for women's rights. And yet in 1989, one year after I graduated from college, when the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible was published, our pew Bible, it still had this footnote about how maybe "Junia" was really "Junias." Not a woman

³ Cotter, 370.

⁴ Cotter, 370.

⁵ Cotter, 370.

⁶ Cotter, 370.

⁷ Cotter, 371.

at all. Because women didn't lead churches. At what point do we let these footnotes disappear, not because of political correctness, or because of how we wish the world would be, but simply because they're not accurate? Because they give an impression that cannot be sustained by the facts?

This is an easy question to ask this congregation. We have working moms and dads and full time moms and dad. We have parents of sons and daughters. We have brothers and sisters. My personal definition of feminism says that feminism will have really taken hold when we are as proud of our sons who are nurses as we are of our daughters who are doctors. And we're getting there. You called a single woman as your minister. I know it doesn't surprise anyone to see women leading worship, leading key committees in the church. We're not surprised when the Holy Spirit shows up and speaks through the women in our community.

But what about when the Holy Spirit speaks through someone with memory loss? Someone with Down's? What about when the Holy Spirit speaks through someone who's transgender or LGBTQ? What if the Holy Spirit speaks through someone who is black or brown? What about when the Holy Spirit speaks through someone who's in this country illegally? What about when the Holy Spirit speaks through someone who has a license to carry a gun? What if the Holy Spirit speaks through a Republican or a Democrat? What if the Holy Spirit speaks through a woman who has been abused by her husband?

We say we believe that nothing constrains or contains the power of God. And yet when someone speaks something true or just or excellent, we don't always hear them. We certainly don't always hear the Holy Spirit in what they are saying. Do I think that the Holy Spirit is in every word that someone different than me says? Not really. But then I don't think the Holy Spirit is in every word that some straight, white, rich guy says simply because he's male, wealthy, Anglo-Saxon and heterosexual. I'm comfortable building a filter that lets me assess when the Holy Spirit is moving through that kind of person. I'm not even aware when I don't bother to build a filter for a whole class of people because I don't think God will speak through them. I'm just dead to the possibility. We all carry around footnotes in our hearts that say, "or Junias" because the idea of it being "Junia" is simply too strange.

Isaiah says, *On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, ... This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.* (Isaiah 25:6-9) All people get invited to the feasts. The shroud that is cast over all people is destroyed. The tears will be wiped away from all faces.

When Isaiah was written, the Israelites were in exile in Babylon, wondering what had gone so terribly wrong that everything had been lost. One of the major revelations of the prophet Isaiah was that the God of Israel was the God of all the people, not just some of them.⁸ That when God called for truth and justice and excellence, no one was left out. That God spoke not just to some people, and definitely not just the people of a single nation, but to all people.

⁸ Jeffrey W. Carter, "Proper 23, Pastoral Perspective, Isaiah 25:1-9" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 148.

Isaiah pointed out, though, that God has been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress (Isaiah 25:4). When the song of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm, God stilled the song of the ruthless. (Isaiah 24:4-5) We follow a God who will speak through anyone but who has a particular tenderness for those in distress. When you look at the work that Barbara and Marguerite's Place does, you see how the Holy Spirit is speaking. No exceptions. No voices ruled out because it would give God too strange a character to speak through them. No footnotes put in because we are so certain we know the kinds of people God would speak through. Not on God's holy mountain (Isaiah 25:6), not when the God of peace is with us (Philippians 4:9).