

October 13, 2019, Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster
Susan Gascho-Cooke
"For Junia: Is "hidden" in the eye of the beholder?"
[Romans 16:1-7](#)

This morning's "hidden figure" is the Junia who is referenced in the Romans 16:7. We are lucky enough to have our very own Junia here at CMCL. She is two years old, the beloved daughter of Amanda and Zack Stoltzfus, and granddaughter of Sid and Jan Stoltzfus. Our little 2-year-old Junia came to have her name because Amanda encountered the 2,000 years-past Junia in her seminary studies.

Both Amanda and I found a particular book in our 20s, entitled *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* by Karen Jo Torjesen. I asked Amanda to tell me a little about the naming of her daughter. Here is what she shared:

[In When Women Were Priests] I read that the early church was full of women leaders and that it was only through complicated political and societal reasons and over hundreds of years that this tradition was lost. Junia's story freed me to re-examine the Bible [and] my faith and to eventually be bold in following God's call in my life.

So, I guess we have the apostle Junia to thank for our wonderful junior and senior youth pastor!

Amanda went on: *When I knew I was going to have a baby girl," she said, I decided very quickly that I wanted to name her Junia. Thankfully, Zack liked the name as well! For me, naming my daughter Junia is a declaration to the world that God's call will always be greater than the limitations society would place on her. She is known and loved by God and called to be exactly what God created her to be.*

So, what is ancient Junia's story? Literally, all we know of Junia is this one sentence in Romans 16:7 in which Paul says

1. she is his "relative" (or "compatriot"),
2. she had been imprisoned along with Paul,
3. she was an apostle, and not only that,
4. he considered her "*prominent* among the apostles", and that
5. she was "in Christ" before Paul was

That is actually a considerable amount about a person packed into this one verse. I'd be curious how many of you have heard of Junia, or knew that there was one named apostle who was female?

I had not heard of her until I read Torjesen's book back in college. And I only read it because I found it on a bookshelf, not because it was assigned to me in any of my Bible classes. There are some really good reasons why many folks, even those who were raised to be quite biblically literate, have not heard of Junia, or of any female apostles. One of the primary reasons is that she was removed from the Bible for much of the 20th century, when most of the preachers we would have heard growing up would have prepared for ministry.

Junia was known back in the fourth century, and neither her gender nor her apostolic credentials were questioned. Well-known church father John Chrysostom wrote, in 344 AD:

"to be outstanding among the apostles— just think what a wonderful song of praise that is! They were outstanding on the basis of their works & virtuous actions. Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been in that she was even deemed worthy of the title apostle. (In ep. ad Romanos 31.2)"

Chrysostom's words are a "statue-like memorial to Junia ... that gave an anchor to the contemporary feminine reading of Romans 16:7," writes Scot McKnight, biblical scholar and author of *Junia is Not Alone*.

So, what happened between 344 and 2019? For one, during the time of the Reformation, theologians who were raised in churches (Protestant and Catholic) that did not allow women in leadership. So, they began to look at the Romans 16:7 and the mention of a female apostle and assume that something was wrong. *It must have been a typo.*

Martin Luther was a big proponent of the typo theory, and in his German translations he began to add masculine articles to the name Junia, turning her into a man in the text. He was not the first to do this, but his prominence gave this interpretation a wide reading.

Juni**A** survived a few more centuries in the composite Greek New Testament texts that translations have been based upon. "From Erasmus in the Reformation era to the famous German scholar Erwin Nestle's edition of the Greek NT in 1927, *Junia was a woman*. Apart from one lesser known publication of the Greek New Testament, which had Junia**S** [a masculinized version of Junia] in a footnote but not in the text, no Greek New Testament had anything but Juni**A**, a woman's name, until Nestle's edition in 1927." (1)

"In the 13th edition of his composite Greek New Testament, in 1927, Eberhard Nestle removed Juni**A** and created her alter ego Junia**S**," by simply adding the letter "s." He put Junia**S** in the text, and moved Juni**A** to a footnote. (2)

Pastors and students study these composite Greek New Testaments, but how many read the footnotes closely? We put a high level of trust in the editors to get the text right. "In changing her name and creating a new male name, Nestle buried Junia alive," McKnight writes.

"The United Bible Society's edition of the Greek New Testament, one that many seminary students learned to use instead of Nestle-Aland," took it a step further. The UBS grades its translation decisions, to alert readers to which words or phrases have been questioned over the years. But when the UBS changed Juni**A** to Junia**S**, they rated the word Junia**S** an 'A' grade, meaning "virtually certain." So, for those who did look at footnotes, despite the centuries Juni**A** being the unquestioned translation in the Greek NT, they gave readers no clue that this translation was recent or in question.

Then Kurt Aland, "the 20th century's most famous NT textual scholar," took over as editor of the Nestle Greek NT, and in 1979 he left Junia**S** in the text, and removed the footnote mentioning Juni**A**, leaving no acknowledgement that she had ever existed, much less that she had been removed or re-gendered.

So, in the Greek New Testaments that were being studied in the 20th century by most of the folks who were writing the theology and Bible texts that most of our Bible teachers and preachers would have learned from, Junia was first a footnote, then a downgraded footnote, then removed.

“The logic [behind the change] was simple [and gradual over the centuries]: the person in Romans 16:7 is an apostle, and apostles can’t be women, so Junia cannot have been a woman. Junia was a man. This was” an unsolicited “sex-change operation by way of redaction.” (3)

It was created to fix what must have been a typo, right? One of the funnest/funniest new words I’ve learned recently — I subscribe to a “Word A Day” email — was September 30th’s word of the day. The word is: “thinko.” (4)

A “thinko” is “a careless error in *thinking*,” formed on the pattern of “typo” (a careless error in typing). And it’s fun to apply here.

Because, let’s face it, there was no *typo* in the Greek New Testament. What happened was a *thinko* on the part of biblical scholars and theologians. But if you can’t fathom the existence of a female apostle, the only explanation for a woman’s name in that context is a typo. A technicality which they saw no trouble in remedying.

This concept of typo vs thinko is, in all seriousness, though, a really important one, in that I think it shapes far more of our understandings of almost everything in life, than we probably know. I’m guessing that we mistake thinkos for typos daily, if not hourly. It’s not just a mistake that we can pin on some poor, benighted biblical scholars back in the day.

There was no great conspiracy to erase Junia. It happened because of careless thinking and an inability to fathom the possibility that God could work beyond the limits of current (at the time) understandings. Something we are probably *all* guilty of, conservative and liberal, here and now.

One of the key theories in *When Women Were Priests*, is that women such as Junia frequently had leadership roles in the early church. The reason was that the early church gathered in homes, and women were often the *de facto* heads of households — in charge of meals and hospitality. The early church was a movement that met in homes, and whose primary ritual was the sharing of a meal.

What happened, some say, is that as Christianity grew, rather *outgrew*, the homes they met in, and moved into larger groupings and buildings, it grew into realms whose secular counterparts, by size, did *not* typically have women in leadership.

Much like the churches many of us grew up in, where women were allowed to teach children or small Sunday school groups, but not allowed to preach to large groups or lead whole congregations. They might be allowed to help plant a church, especially if it was in an unpopular location, but when it grew in size, it was expected that the reins would be turned over to a man.

Torjesen’s argument is that “women in leadership” is not a modern notion, but a return to common practice in the early church, just as Junia was in the Greek New Testament since ancient days, only to be removed more recently.

You might say, why do we need to talk about this at CMCL, when clearly “women in leadership” isn’t an issue here. And yes, we do have a strong history of supporting women in leadership roles here. In fact, we struggle to find *men* for leadership roles here sometimes. But it’s a bit of an “exception proves the rule” situation — we are unusual as an all-female pastoral staff.

(If Junia's story interests you, one way to explore more is the website, juniaproject.com)

Back in 2002, *The Atlantic* published an article entitled "1491," by Charles C. Mann. As you might guess, it was reviewing new scholarship on the American continents as they were when Columbus landed here. I was blown away by the possibilities laid out in this article when I read it for the first time, and I have thought of it often in the years since I read it.

It's a crying shame to try to summarize this article in a few words, but for the sake of brevity I will try. Basically, it shared recent theories about what America was like in 1491, vs what it was like by the time the Mayflower landed more than 100 years later.

While we all have heard how European diseases ravaged the First Peoples here, there has long been the opinion that America was always relatively sparsely populated, compared to Europe.

"1491" tells of theories of 10 to 100 million people in the Americas, which at the higher ends was more than Europe at the time. These higher population guesses are based such things as looking at death records kept by Spanish missions. Based on the number of deaths recorded in the early years of the missions compared to later, it shows evidence of much larger populations than in later years.

One of the prime contributors to the blasphemous number of deaths was likely pigs. Three hundred pigs, to be exact, brought by Hernando de Soto, the Spanish "explorer" who landed in Tampa Bay, Florida. Pigs carry many diseases that impact humans and they reproduce and disperse much more quickly than humans. It's thought those 300 pigs are one of the prime reasons that disease spread inland and razed communities who never even set eyes on a white person.

It's possible that more than 90% of Native populations were wiped out. Whole languages, whole cultures, maybe ... probably.

So, the land that 17th century Europeans laid eyes on and described as empty and overgrown, was a land that had undergone a human population decimation of genocidal proportions.

And here's where the thinko problems come in. European eyes looked at North America for all the signals of civilization they knew of: ruins of permanent buildings, fences, domesticated animals. They saw none of these things, and therefore presumed that there had been little to no human influence on the land or its creatures.

With a new set of eyes, scholars look back at old descriptions of the land and animals, and see evidence of radical manipulation and husbandry by humans.

Like people everywhere, [Native Americans] survived by cleverly exploiting their environment. Europeans tended to manage land by breaking it into fragments for farmers and herders. [First peoples] often worked on such a grand scale that the scope of their ambition can be hard to grasp. They created small plots, as Europeans did (about 1.5 million acres of terraces still exist in the Peruvian Andes), but they also reshaped entire landscapes to suit their purposes. A principal tool was fire, used to keep down underbrush and create the

open, grassy conditions favorable for game. Rather than domesticating animals for meat, [Native Americans] retooled whole ecosystems to grow bumper crops of elk, deer, and bison.

The first white settlers in Ohio found forests as open as English parks—they could drive carriages through the woods... In North America, [Native American] torches had their biggest impact on the Midwestern prairie, much or most of which was created and maintained by fire. Millennia of exuberant burning shaped the plains into vast buffalo farms. When Indian societies disintegrated, forest invaded savannah in Wisconsin, Illinois, Kansas, Nebraska, and the Texas Hill Country.

Is it possible that the [Native Americans] changed the Americas more than the invading Europeans did? "The answer is probably yes for most regions for the next 250" after Columbus "and for some regions right up to the present time."

[Many] botanists believe that "what the eco-imagery would like to picture as a pristine, untouched Urwelt [primeval world] in fact has been managed by [the] people[s of North America] for millennia."

In ecological terms, ... the [Native Americans] were the "keystone species" of American ecosystems. A keystone species ... is a species "that [disproportionately] affects the survival and abundance of many other species."... Removing them "results in a relatively significant shift in the composition of the [ecological] community."

When disease swept [Native Americans] from the land, ... the ecological ancien régime collapsed, and strange new phenomena emerged. ... Among these ... was a population explosion in the species that the [Native Americans] had kept down by hunting. After disease killed off the [Native Americans] [one scholar] believes, buffalo vastly extended their range. Their numbers more than sextupled. The same occurred with elk and mule deer.

"If the elk were here in great numbers all this time, the archaeological sites should be chock-full of elk bones, but the archaeologists will tell you the elk weren't there." The evidence points to the number of elk jumping about 500 years ago.

Passenger pigeons may be another example. ... People reported flocks "10 miles in width, by 120 in length." For hours the birds darkened the sky from horizon to horizon. According to one archaeologist, passenger pigeons were "incredibly dumb and always roosted in vast hordes, so they were very easy to harvest." Because they were readily caught and good to eat, archaeological digs should find many pigeon bones in the pre-Columbian strata of Indian middens. But they aren't there. The mobs of birds in the history books, he says, were "outbreak populations always a symptom of an extraordinarily disrupted ecological system." (5)

If what white settlers saw in the 17th-18th centuries was "a woodland unsullied by the human presence... there was much more of it in the late eighteenth century than in the early sixteenth." (6) Due to the decimation of the human population of North America.

If I had a way to share all of that in less detail, I would have, but these theories about the geographical history of our land, make me wonder what we simply cannot see when we look at the land and institutions and histories of our own people, whoever they may be.

Where might we see the evidence of the influence of those individuals and groups who remain “hidden figures” in the written record, or whose contributions are just never seen? What is the impact that women, whether their names or stories have officially been recorded, have had in the larger and smaller worlds of which we are a part?

Certainly, it is our job to search out and correct the typos that need fixing in our stories and our histories. Junia needed to be corrected back into existence, full stop.

But criticizing those who have made typos and thinkos is easy finger-pointing, important as it may be. Might the “hiddenness” of a figure be just as much in the eye of the beholder? And the beholders are us, just as much those Bible redactors. Just as much as the Europeans who saw this land and laid their own assumptions on it, as surely as their claim of dominion and destiny.

Might our job be to work on our vision, too? To recognize not just our typos and thinkos, but our sightos and dreamos and faithos, in order that we might see something “bigger,” in Beyoncé’s words? To be able to see, to imagine the places where hidden figures have gone before us, tending to our land, our faith, our families, our stories? To be able to recognize different ways of leading among us, where people are tending and changing and maintaining our structures in ways we don’t have eyes to see?

For previously “hidden figures” will possibly, probably, surely, have ways of tending our churches, our institutions, our land that we might recognize as leadership.

And if you’re a Junia who’s gotten typo-ed or thinko-ed or JuniaSed, or whose gardening has gone unrecognized, remember: you are a part of something bigger! God is surely doing something WAY bigger. (7)

May we have eyes to see, that we might be part not just of repairing and fixing the typos, but a part of learning the lost and ancient faithful ways, and tending the new thing, together, in a new way.

¹ Scot McKnight, *Junia is Not Alone*, Patheos Press. December 1, 2011.

² Scot McKnight, *Junia is Not Alone*, Patheos Press. December 1, 2011.

³ Scot McKnight, *Junia is Not Alone*, Patheos Press. December 1, 2011.

⁴ “A.Word.A.Day.” wordsmith.org

⁵ Charles C. Mann, “1491,” *The Atlantic*. March 2002 issue. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2002/03/1491/302445/>

⁶ Charles C. Mann, “1491,” *The Atlantic*. March 2002 issue. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2002/03/1491/302445/>

⁷ thanks to Chynaah Maryoung-Cooke, Daryl Snider and Dean Clemmer for covering Beyoncé’s “Bigger” during offertory in today’s service! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Flka2N72S8M>