

Thanksgiving for the Forgotten Now Remembered

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

November 23, 2025 – Morning worship on Stewardship Sunday

Text: Romans 16:3-7

This morning I am introducing you to one of my favorite woman in the Bible. Her name is Junia and we heard just a tiny portion of her story in the text we heard read from Romans just a few minutes ago. You might be wondering why I would be talking about Junia on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, a time when sermons in congregational churches and others encourage us to focus on counting our blessings, contemplating what it is we are thankful for, or perhaps even how to get along with family members we don't especially care for at the Thanksgiving Dinner Table. Well, I wanted to talk about Junia as our last woman in this long sermon series focused on women of the Bible because she is the one to whom I am most personally grateful. Why, you're probably wondering. That is easy for me to answer. I am thankful to Junia because her story is one of the "last straws" that compelled me to pursue my Masters of Divinity Degree at Harvard Divinity School at the tender age of 53. Let me explain.

Junia is sometimes referred to as "the lost apostle" because she was the victim of identity theft sometime during the 13th century. No, someone didn't open credit card accounts in her name or anything like that. It was much more subversive, and even damaging than that. These medieval monk transcribers of the New Testament texts just decided that they were must be wrong about this name. Why? Because these scribing male monks simply could not accept that a woman – Junia – could possibly be the person Paul was describing in this text of greetings to all the folks who had stood behind and beside him in his work on behalf

of Christ. It had to be a mistake because Paul, who was so central to the faith they professed and had devoted their lives to could not possibly have intended to put a woman on the same level as Andronicus as he does in this text. It could be a woman because just look at how Paul describes this person! This person was a relative of Paul's, a fellow prisoner and he even describes this person as "prominent among the apostles and were in Christ before I was." Good grief! That just could not be a woman! It had to have been the result of some sort of ancient scribing typo. The correct name had to be Junias, a male, and not Junia, a female. And so they made the change. I mean, it had to be a mistake right? Just one letter was omitted. "s" By accident obviously. So, these ancient invisible monks just added the "s" – Junia became Junias and Junia disappeared from history. The first woman referred to explicitly as an apostle by Paul is simply erased.

Remarkably, we actually who did this. It was Giles of Rome in the 13th century.¹ Giles was a very prominent friar in the Order of St. Augustine who was well known and respected as a philosopher and Scholastic theologian. He served as prior general of his order and as Archbishop of Bourges. He published several well known texts used for instructional purposes, with his primary focus being on the papacy and leadership in general. What a surprise that such a person simply could not find it in himself to believe that Junia was a woman. Given how Paul described her and her significance to the early church, it was clear, to him at least, that she had to be a man. So he made the change and it stuck. In my research for this, I checked one of the online sources I use for Scripture quotes and I am sad to say, I found this rendition of verse 7 (the one which names Junia) in the Revised

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Junia_\(New_Testament_person\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Junia_(New_Testament_person))

Standard Version Catholic Edition (RSVCE). This is why words matter and, in Junia's case, even single letters matter. A lot.

Important to note, however, is that most biblical translations now do refer to her as Junia. Biblical scholars were able to discern that Junia was indeed a woman based on in-depth and detailed work which revealed that "until the 12th century there was no record of Junia being interpreted as a man. In other words, for the first 1200 years after her death no one questioned that Junia was a woman. Her inclusion in the list of apostles important to the early church by no less a personage than Paul was often cited as proof that Paul did accept and encourage the leadership of women in the early church. This is significant still today because Paul is often cited as the source of quotes demeaning women and demanding that they remain silent in church, never even attempting to teach a man or anyone else. Women should also keep their hair covered, and so on and so on. The thing is, post-modern linguistic and biblical scholarship as also made a strong case that these admonitions against women were not written by Paul but by later writers who wrote these texts and letters in his name, a common practice in that era. But, none of this has served to dim the controversy over Junia and her status within the Roman Catholic Church as well as many conservative Protestant evangelical churches which believe in the notion of complementarianism when considering the role of women in church.² Women have an important role in life and in the faith, they say, but as child-bearers and family nurturers. Not as leaders in the church.

Okay, now that we know a little bit about Junia's story, back to the question as to why she is someone I am profoundly thankful

² Ibid.

for. That's simple. Learning Junia's story changed forever my perspective on the Bible, what I thought I knew about it and that serious study of the Scriptures could literally be life-changing in more ways than I had ever considered. Junia's story had been lost for a millennium and, for some people, she still doesn't exist for the simple face of being a woman. As someone who has lived life since childhood as a person of faith, I needed to understand this and my life of study, both formal and informal began in interest. And truthfully, that pursuit of knowledge has never really stopped. It propelled me through undergraduate studies, through a brief stint in business and finally a return to ministry in a lay capacity in the field of Christian Education. When I realized I needed stronger credentials to do what I felt called to do, I returned to school, applying to Harvard Divinity because that was, and still is, the place to study feminist theology. It was in this course of study that I learned that, sadly, Junia's story is not that unusual in the Bible, nor in church history for that matter. This knowledge informs my ministry and my work still to this day. All thanks to Junia.

The thing is, Junia often comes to my mind as I have encountered over the years so many stories of women being overlooked, undermined, dismissed, harassed and undervalued. I have seen it more often in my life than I like to think, to be honest. This is why for so many women of my age, it is painful to realize that current generations of young women do not realize how hard so many of us had to fight so they can enjoy the rights they now have. They don't know that until the late 1970's and early '80's women couldn't open a credit card or even a bank account without their husband's permission. I was a newlywed when I discovered this at the local JC Penney's store which refused me a credit card until my husband approved it. To this day, my husband's name

appears first on many of the bills etc. that we receive even though I am the primary bread winner and have been for some time. I'm not sure young women today know that no less a person than Martha Stewart spent time in prison because she was accused of insider trading (like no one else has ever done that before). That evidence was not the strongest but she was convicted anyway because so many people testified about how difficult she was to work with. They didn't like her. The people on the jury didn't like her. So they convicted her. And, in true Martha Stewart style, she went to prison and learned how to knit. I mean, holy cow.

So, back to Thanksgiving and being thankful for Junia. I need to amend that just a tad as I also need to acknowledge that Junia is not the only woman I am thankful. She's not the only *person* I'm thankful for. In fact, in all candor, Junia would really be pretty far down on that list because she is just a woman whose story inspired me, like so many others have – Eleanor Roosevelt, Katharine Hepburn and Michelle Obama to name a few. No, it's the women and men who have been the foundation of my life that I am truly grateful. Men like my husband whose incredibly kind and generous spirit inspires me every day. Men like my dad who worked swing shifts in the steel mills of Pittsburgh while going to night school to get an engineering degree. Women like my grandmother Anna who, when I remember Thanksgivings of long ago, I picture sitting on a stool in our kitchen cutting up loaves of stale bread for stuffing and then peeling mounds of potatoes for the obligatory mashed potatoes to hold up all that turkey gravy. And like my other grandmother Olive (another story and another sermon!) who taught my mom how to bake all those pies she became famous for. And, like my mom who battled mental health issues all her life but still loved her family and cared for us the best she was able. These are all the people I am thankful for at

Thanksgiving, this year and every year. These are the people who helped me to become who I am today – a wife, mother and grandmother. A pastor and scholar. A woman richly blessed as this season of Thanksgiving kicks off in earnest.

So, this year, as you sit down to your Thanksgiving celebrations – whatever they look like and whomever you are with, or not with – I invite you to pause for a moment to remember all the individuals, all the people who are part of the foundation of your life. Take the time to remember them, and all your experiences with them – good and bad. Give thanks for all the ways in which they helped to make you “you.” Because, dear ones, that is what Thanksgiving is really all about – remembering the forgotten who have made you who you are. Happy Thanksgiving! May the food be spectacular, the company perfect and the grace before the meal be short and to the point! Amen.