



When You Don't Fit In

Geek or cheerleader, princess or tomboy, teacher's pet or goth clubber. The labels, the vain attempts to fit in...I thought I'd left it all behind me the day I graduated from high school. But apparently I was wrong.

I recently found myself experiencing a flashback to a reality I had assumed was firmly in my past. My superior at work—in a Christian place of higher education—announced that I was being let go from my position as director of communications. Why? “You don't fit in,” he explained, adding that, among other things, I was too much of a women's advocate in a school that hired taut conservatives with Baptist roots. To be honest, I was very hurt, especially since I had never made my stance on women in ministry a secret. After all, I do write a column on women in leadership for a national magazine!

In retrospect, my former supervisor's comment and my subsequent job loss have turned out to be a kindness. Better to deal with unalloyed discrimination than to endure years of subtle pressure to conform. That type of thing happens to many women around the world. In order to be allowed to minister, they are urged to “tone down” their emotions, “restate” how far they believe a woman should be allowed to go in ministry, and even, for some, limit themselves to lay ministry because pulpit ministry is outright denied to women regardless of their qualifications.

In *The Lost Apostle: Searching for the Truth about Junia*, a new book from Jossey-Bass, author Rena Pederson writes:

Junia is the only woman mentioned in scripture as an apostle...(Rom. 16:7). As Paul commends early leaders of

the church in Rome and sends them greetings, he singles out Junia and Andronicus (presumably her husband) as being Christians before him, in prison with him, and “outstanding among the apostles.” The scholarly consensus in the early church was that Paul was referring to a woman, but her name was lost for centuries, because her name was changed to a man's name (“Junias”) in the 13th century by church leaders who did not think a woman could have been an apostle. Thanks to more accurate scholarship, most Bible translations today are going back to the woman's name, although most believers don't know about that change yet.

I recently had the opportunity to ask Pederson a few questions, and I share her responses here with all of you who may be feeling as if you—like Junia, like me—just don't fit in.

E. Rios: What is your reaction to women in ministry being told they don't fit in?

R. Pederson: It is a travesty of faith and justice that women still are treated as second-class citizens in many denominations. We need to ask the church fearlessly, “What does that say about God if you insist that women are not ‘holy enough’ to fit in? Would a loving God say half of the human race made in the image of God is less worthy? Doesn't such treatment contradict Jesus' own efforts to reach out to women?”

ER: What intrigued you about Junia?

RP: I found it shocking that her story had been hidden for so long. As a matter of justice as well as faith, I felt women today should know about Junia and the part she played in establishing the early church. Perhaps that interest was sharpened by the fact that I had often been in the position of being the “first” woman in roles reserved for men—first editorial page editor, first woman board

member, first woman president of the civic group, that sort of thing. I had seen how hard it was for women to obtain positions of influence and had seen how often women's contributions were obscured in the corporate world, even today. But my main motivation was to see Junia's name restored, to see her included among the many women of faith who helped start the early church and sacrificed their lives to spread the good news.

ER: What aspects of Junia's story are still struggles for women today?

RP: *The New York Times* recently did a front-page story about the “stained glass ceiling,” presenting a multiplicity of examples of how women who have become ministers are often shunted off to assistant pastor positions or to smaller churches where they subsist on poverty wages that male ministers won't accept. Mary Lambert, a woman who had taught Sunday school in upstate New York for 50 years, was fired last summer because she was a woman. Although there are more women in seminaries and pulpits today than ever before, they still struggle to be respected and to be truly heard.

As women in positions of leadership, we share a sisterhood of courage in the midst of rejection. Junia's story humbles us to remember that even when our gifts are suppressed or belittled by those in power around us, we can still make an impact today and for centuries to come. When you do what God calls you to do, even if your story is lost, it will ultimately be found. If you have touched souls, your legacy will continue. I thank God for Junia, and I thank God for you. Walk on, sisters! And remember—in heaven we will all fit in! ■

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