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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
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News from Pittsburgh: Grafting In
Romans 11:13-24, <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=175187544>

It's been a quiet week in Pittsburgh, my adopted hometown. That's not to say that it hasn't been an unusual week. The past days have proven true what Will Rogers said many years ago: *Everything is changing ... People are taking their comedians seriously and their politicians as a joke.* We get our news from comedians like Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, while when we look at our politicians, we can only laugh – Sarah Palin on a motorcycle, Newt Gingrich losing his staff while on a cruise, and the three words we have heard *far* too often this past week – Representative Anthony Weiner.

In terms of the weather, it's been good *not* to be in the news: Terrible tornadoes in Joplin, MS; flooding along the Mississippi River, and now the Wallow wildfire in Arizona; while here in Pittsburgh, it's been pretty nice. When you hear of 400,000 acres burnt up in the desert Southwest, it's hard to counter that by complaining that it's been a bit too overcast for my tomato plants to thrive. We look around Pittsburgh and note that the Art Fair, by and large, wasn't rained out, the Pirates are still at (or above) .500, and it's been great sleeping weather at night with the windows open – which makes us almost embarrassed by such good fortune. It's good to be here in Pittsburgh, but like always, we find that hard to admit to others. Such is our lot here in western PA.

Rob Fitzpatrick was still getting acquainted with Pittsburgh, having just moved here a few weeks ago from Southern California. Rob had come to Pittsburgh to be near his not-quite-fiancée, Sandy. He hadn't popped the question to her yet, but they both knew it was coming. His move to Pittsburgh was the final step before proposing – a way for them to live in the same city and spend more time together before they walked down that long aisle, leapt over the broom, and pledged Thee thy troth, as it were.

Rob had found a good job working at Phipps Conservatory. Rob was a botanist and a rose specialist, which is something that you don't mention to the people seated next to you on the airplane or else you'll spend the entire flight diagnosing why their African Violets won't bloom or what those funny yellow spots are on their Azalea bushes. Rob liked working at Phipps, and now that Pitt and Carnegie Mellon were on summer break, he wasn't so uptight about driving through Oakland. No, he had other reasons to be uptight. That evening, he and Sandy were having dinner at her parents' house. Just the four of them. He'd met Sandy's folks once before, and he liked Sandy's mom a lot. She was just like her daughter in so many ways – the same shape of the face, the same easy laugh, the same flip of the hair, but with more gray to Sandy's chestnut brown. But Rob wasn't so sure about where he stood with Sandy's father, Arthur; and that made him nervous about this evening's dinner. He knew Sandy and her mom would undoubtedly go off into the kitchen at some point, laughing and chatting arm in arm,

leaving Rob and Arthur alone in the family room to make conversation. And that hadn't gone so well the first time they met.

It was shortly after Rob moved to town when Sandy set up a time for him to come over and meet her parents. He'd spent the day unpacking boxes, so after he took a shower, he followed the directions he'd scribbled on an envelope and made his way to her folks' house in Morningside. Now when Sandy goes swimming, she's the type that dives right in and *then* tells you what the water temperature is like. Rob likes to dip a toe in the shallow end first, and carefully plot out how he will slowly get acclimated to his watery destination. So on this particular occasion, when Sandy told him to stop by for a meal with her folks, she failed to mention that it was her folks' 30th wedding anniversary. And her four siblings would all be at the house as well. With their spouses. And one crazy great-aunt. When Rob arrived, his internal warning alarms started to go off when he stepped inside and heard several conversations going on in the next room. The next thing he knew, he was being led around a corner and heard Sandy loudly announce, "Everyone, this is Rob" to a crowded family room full of at least 10 people Rob had never seen in person before. There was a hurried round of introductions. Rob frantically tried to keep the names straight as the next person came into view. And all the while, Sandy's mom stood smiling over in the kitchen doorway while Arthur remained seated in a padded easy chair, looking studiously at this would-be suitor of his youngest daughter.

Rob was soon pulled into a gaggle of Sandy's siblings and spouses, asked about life in California, and generally given a light-hearted grilling by this group who had been pestering Sandy to finally introduce them to her mysterious botanical suitor from sunny Southern Cal. At one point the crazy great-aunt sized Rob up and awkwardly announced that he looked like a fine specimen and that Sandy had better get married to him quick before she whisked the boy away herself and locked him in the attic of her Shadyside house; then she asked for another rum and Coke and soon dozed off in the recliner. Arthur was over watching television and at one point, Rob had gone over and tried to engage him in some small talk. There was a baseball game playing and although Rob knew a lot more about rosebuds and aphids than he did about the Royals and the Astros, he gamely asked who was playing. "The Yankees," came the distracted reply. "Everyone's watching to see if Jeter gets his 3000th hit. He'd be only the 27th player to reach Clemente's threshold of 3000 hits." Rob quickly had to decipher a bunch of baseball jargon. He had heard Jeter's name before, so he gathered he was a Yankee baseball player about to break a significant record for career hits. But being more of a scientist than a sports fan, Rob's brain got to turning and he asked, perhaps a bit too quickly, "But what if Clemente gets another hit himself? Does the threshold change and get harder for others to cross?" Arthur gave Rob an exasperated look and said firmly, "He can't get any more hits. Roberto Clemente died in a plane crash a few months after he got his 3000th hit September 30, 1972 in a game against the New York Mets at the old Three Rivers Stadium downtown." Just then Rob noticed hanging over the television set a framed, autographed photo of a dark-skinned Pirates' ballplayer wearing number 21, and his sinking gut told him that that athlete was Roberto Clemente. Sandy's mom then called everyone in for lunch and Rob didn't have a chance to redeem himself with Arthur that day – and now they were going to have dinner together that evening.

Rob was telling all this to a co-worker, Owen, whom he really liked. Owen was an older man, who, as a lifelong Pittsburgher, chuckled at Rob's baseball faux pas. The two of them were working in a rose display area, carefully grafting on new scions, or twigs, from more exotic rose plants on to the leafy rootstock already growing there. Owen worked quickly and efficiently, making the V-shaped incision in the side of the rootstock, into which he brushed a bit of honey and then grafted in a pointed scion from another rosebush. (The honey was one of Owen's tricks of the trade. He said it made the graft take hold faster.) Rob was following along behind him, taping up the graft to help the two plants truly grow together as one.

Owen said, "Oh, don't worry too much over what you said. Heck, lots of people back in 1972 didn't know who Roberto Clemente was or realize that he was about to get his 3000th hit. Three Rivers Stadium was really designed to hold the Steelers, so it had lousy sightlines for baseball games. And when Clemente got his hit, it was near the end of the season and there were only about 13,000 fans in the stadium that day. Let's just say that Roberto Clemente had to deal with a lot of issues around his race and his language when he was alive; but once he died in that plane crash taking relief supplies to earthquake victims in Nicaragua, then everyone loved him and couldn't get enough of his story."¹

Rob piped up again. "I don't know, Owen. Sandy's family is pretty much all here in Western PA. I'm worried I won't fit in, and that her father won't accept this newcomer." Owen had a way of coming at issues indirectly, so after a pause, he pointed at the work he and Rob were busy doing. "Grafting is a funny process. Just grafting a scion onto a rootstock won't automatically produce a better plant. Sometimes the graft doesn't connect well with the stem; or the new growth overwhelms the existing plant. But we both know that grafting gives you quicker blossoms and a richer variety of flowers than trying to grow roses from tiny seedlings. The natural roots for these exotic pinks would never make it in the soil around the Conservatory; which is why we're grafting them into the stems of hardy rosebushes that can withstand Pittsburgh's humidity and wintry cold.

"People are a lot like rosebushes. In truth, just about everyone is like a plant full of exotic grafts, even if they've spent all their life in Pittsburgh. When you were born, you were grafted into a family, an intruder grafted into your parents' lives. Siblings are the same thing, whether yours or Sandy's – new lives grafted onto an existing rootstock. And spouses are the ultimate in family grafts – outsiders brought in and implanted on the family tree. It rarely does any good to worry too much about the grafts themselves. You always need to focus your attention on the rootstock, the central stem that holds the entire bush together. If its roots go deep, if it has water and nutrients, if it is well-grounded and strong, then all the grafts will grow and flourish just fine. You know me, I like the study the scriptures. And the best part of the bible for a botanist is Romans chapter 11. It talks about all these things. You ought to read it when you get home."

After work, Rob went home and found the box of books that held his old confirmation bible. He sat down and flipped to Romans 11 and read about how the Gentile believers

were being grafted onto the roots of the Jewish faith, like a wild olive shoot grafted onto a cultivated olive tree. God was described as the gardener, the one pruning, the one grafting, the one shaping the tree so that all the branches might thrive. Rob especially liked the verse that said, “If the root is holy, then the branches also are holy.”

He thought some more about Owen’s comment – how we are all grafts onto strange family trees. We are all exotic transplants brought into our communities, our workplaces, our churches, and neighborhoods. It’s not a question of fitting in, because on some level, we’re not supposed to fit in. We are meant to bring the rich blooms of our particular twig to the larger bush. We are meant to be part of the diverse beauty of the central rootstock. It is not a question of privilege and precedence. It is always a matter of staying grounded on a healthy rootstock, even as we celebrate the different blooms all around us. And in the big picture, the rootstock is all that matters. We are engrafted by the gardeners’ grace. We are lovingly placed that we might take root and blossom, so why would we choose to do otherwise? Why would we disparage another stem grafted just as we are? How easy it is to forget that we are the branches, but someone else is the branch, the central stem, the solid rootstock.

Around dinner time, Rob rang the doorbell at Sandy’s parents’ house. Sandy opened the door and greeted him with a kiss. Behind her were her parents, and to them Rob presented a small rose bush clipping in a bud vase with a red ribbon. The clipping was unusual, in that it had two different colored roses emerging from the same stem. Rob explained, “The white rose is a special California variety called the San Diego floribunda while next to it is a pink hybrid tea rose grown here in Phipp’s Conservatory called the Pride of Pittsburgh. I think they look beautiful together. If you’ll let me, I know you have an excellent rose bush in the back yard, and I’m happy to graft this onto the rootstock for you.” Then looking them directly in the eyes, Rob said, “And with a lot of patience and care and mutual love, I’m sure it will blossom here just fine.” Sandy’s mother looked quite touched. And so did Arthur, who smiled and said, “C’mon in. I’ll show you out back to the garden, son.”

And that’s the news from Pittsburgh, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the Presbyterians are above average.

¹ Tyler Kepner, “Clemente’s 3,000th Hit Was Muted Milestone in Ambivalent City,” *New York Times*, June 12, 2011, p. SP 2.