

September 4, 2011
CCC Hopkinton

Scripture Reading

John 13:1-17

¹ *It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*

² *The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus.* ³ *Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God;* ⁴ *so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.* ⁵ *After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.*

⁶ *He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"*

⁷ *Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."*

⁸ *"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."*

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

⁹ *"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"*

¹⁰ *Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you."* ¹¹ *For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.*

¹² *When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them.* ¹³ *"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am.* ¹⁴ *Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.* ¹⁵ *I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.* ¹⁶ *Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.* ¹⁷ *Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.*

Message

Lives Teaching Us Lessons

Priscilla & Aquila: Servanthood and Hospitality

This summer we have taken a look at some of the people remembered in the Bible; wondering what God would have us learn from their lives. For the most part these have been men and women associated with major story lines:

But as we end this summertime series, we do so by looking at a NT couple, a woman named Priscilla and her husband Aquila. I mention them in that order because in most cases, when the Bible mentions them, Priscilla

is mentioned first. And that is unusual; unusual enough for scholars and commentators to ask “why”, given the culture out of which the Bible was written. In the end, there seem to be a consensus that in some ways Priscilla’s impact upon Paul’s ministry and the early church had earned her high recognition; that while she and Aquila were inseparable as a married couple committed to Christian ministry, Priscilla’s gifts and efforts to a greater extent defined this couple.

Compared to the “bigger names” and the more well-known stories we considered this summer, Priscilla & Aquila may seem minor. While I know that faithful Bible readers are be familiar with their names, my guess is that most of us couldn’t remember a Bible story which included this couple. And thought this may indeed be the case, I would argue today that Priscilla & Aquila are no less important than others we’ve considered this summer. For if you have ever been blessed in your life to have a friend who has come next to you; to walk with you and help you accomplish good and godly things; if you’ve ever had a friend in whom you could trust implicitly, then you can relate to how the Apostle Paul felt about Priscilla & Aquila.

Today we remember a couple who helped God accomplish great things through ordinary actions mixed with faith.

So....

What does the Bible tell us about Priscilla & Aquila? Let’s look at some references to them in the scriptures:

1. Acts 18:1-5

Acts 18:1-5

¹ After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, ³ and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. ⁴ Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

⁵ When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah.

What does Acts 18:1-5 tell us about this couple?

We learn that...

- Priscilla & Aquila had once lived in Rome, but apparently, because of difficulties between Jews and Jewish-Christians the Emperor Claudius expelled Jews from Rome. Historians recorded this expulsion at the end of 50 AD. Priscilla & Aquila's likely arrival in Corinth early in 51 AD coincided with Paul's arrival sometime after July of that same year (which is when Gallio became proconsul).

What else can we pick out from this text?

- We learn something because of their names?

While Aquila is a Jewish name, the name Priscilla is purely Roman. Chances are they met and fell in love in Rome. It is even possible that Aquila (a Jewish *native of Pontus*) had once been a slave in Rome, perhaps even in the home of Priscilla. But once freed,

Aquila & Priscilla would have been considered equals under Roman law.

We can also presume something about their faith.

- While their Christian faith is suggested in the 6 scriptural references of them, there is no indication that they directly came to faith through Paul's ministry. Most scholars conclude that Priscilla & Aquila had come to faith in Rome and that they had been a part of the Christian community in Rome.

This text also gives us insight about their hospitality.

- One of the great gifts this couple exercised for the growth of the Church was hospitality. This passage simply says:

³ *and because he(Paul) was a tentmaker as they were,
he stayed and worked with them.*

I do not believe that Priscilla and Aquila opened their home to Paul simply because he was a tent-maker; rather, it was because of the bond they also shared in Christ.

Here we see, in its most basic form, the calling of God's children to love one another through their actions. While Paul continued in his trade, never wanting to be a financial burden on anyone, He was able to speak in the synagogues on the Sabbath, convincing Jews and Gentiles that God's salvation had come through Jesus Christ.

This ministry found great practical support through the hospitality of Priscilla and Aquila.

As an aside, it is interesting to note here that one of the practices common in Corinth and the rest of the ancient Middle East, which may seem a bit strange to us is that people practicing the same craft (tent-makers, silversmiths, basket weavers) would set up shop next to each other, thus creating areas of commercial concentration. Each craftsman would sell similar items.

We do see a remnant of this practice in our culture in places like the “garment district” of NYC. Yet, it still seems strange in our culture where merchants generally seek to “fill a niche”... to sell donuts where you would not find a DD, or to start up a hair salon where people have had to drive miles in order to get a good haircut.

In biblical days there was a comradeship among merchants, which pointed customers to fellow tentmakers if they didn’t have just what the customer wanted. So when Priscilla & Aquila, and then Paul arrived in Corinth they were quickly incorporated among tent-makers; more specifically weavers of goat hair cloth (cilicium; because the craft originated in Cilicia).

This first passage tells us that

- Eventually, Paul became freed from work with contributions from Macedonian Churches via Silas & Timothy. Years later, Paul would write to the Christians in Corinth:

2 Corinthians 11:9 – 9

And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so.

Paul's ministry in Corinth flourished thanks to financial support from Macedonia and Priscilla & Aquila's hospitality in Corinth. But this couple would have even more an impact on Paul and the Church than that.

- Imagine, if you will, the kind of conversations shared while tent-making in Corinth.

It was likely that somewhere in this time period, whether in the marketplace or in the home of Priscilla & Aquila, that Paul's desire to visit Rome began to germinate. While he would state that desire later during his ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:21), all we need to do is to begin imagining the testimonies shared between Paul, Priscilla & Aquila of what God was doing in many places, including Rome.

In his letter to Christians in Rome, whom he had yet to meet in person, the Apostle Paul wrote:

Romans 1:8-10

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. ⁹ God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you ¹⁰ in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.

I think it is very reasonable to presume that some, if not most, of what Paul knew about the Christian community in Rome came through Priscilla & Aquila.

The Bible gives us more information about this couple in:

2. Acts 18:18-20

Acts 18: 18-20

¹⁸ *Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sisters and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchreae because of a vow he had taken.*

¹⁹ *They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.* ²⁰ *When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined.*

- Paul's commission from God was to plant and nurture Christian fellowships through the preaching of the Gospel in the Gentile world. He had been doing that in Corinth but now he was on the move again. Actually, this passage reveals a wonderful strategy of bringing the Gospel to Ephesus, a city to which Paul had earlier wanted to go, but had been blocked by God's Spirit:

-

Acts 16:6

⁶ *Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.*

But now Paul had opportunity to stop in Ephesus on his way back to Jerusalem, and he did so with Priscilla & Aquila in tow. It is becoming evident that Paul had full confidence in this couple's ability to share the Gospel and nurture Christian community, as he leaves the Ephesians in their hands.

And the Bible records the fruit of Paul's confidence in them:

3. Acts 18:24-28

²⁴ Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. ²⁵ He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. ²⁶ He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

²⁷ When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers and sisters encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. When he arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. ²⁸ For he vigorously refuted his Jewish opponents in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah.

Here we are given even another insight into the gifts God had given Priscilla & Aquila, which they offered up in faith. Here we see the gift of teaching helping God to transform a dynamic preacher named Apollos into a better preacher of the Gospel; who not only knew our human need to turn away from sin and walk righteously before God, but, thanks to Priscilla & Aquila, now knew about the power of God's Spirit at work in all who believe that God's salvation has come to us in Jesus Christ.

So effective was their instruction to Apollos that soon they were encouraging him, and sending him to Greece with their letter of recommendation where he had a very effective ministry.

The ordinary actions of Priscilla & Aquila; hospitality, teaching and encouragement were used by God to impact early Church leaders and laity in many locations.

In fact, while we know that Priscilla & Aquila stayed in Ephesus during Paul's long absence and that the Church in Ephesus met in their home (1 Corinthians 16:19), we know that when Paul finally wrote to the Christians in Rome, (57 AD), Priscilla & Aquila were back in Rome using their gifts there. Commentators have suggested that this was Paul's strategy at work again, sending this couple ahead of him again to do the groundwork for his desired visit, a trip which you may recall met with a 2-year delay.

And a final note of their work, we know in a later letter, Paul's second letter to Timothy written from jail in Rome (64-67 AD), that Priscilla & Aquila eventually went back to Ephesus.

Can we imagine what this couple meant to Paul and the early church? Well.. we don't have to imagine, Paul stated it in

Romans 16:3-4

*Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus.
They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches
of the Gentiles are grateful to them.*

Priscilla & Aquila exemplified for the early Church Jesus' calling to humble servanthood. In the Apostle Peter's first Epistle we are encouraged to;

1 Peter 4:9-10

Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.

Today we are remembering people who helped God accomplish great things through ordinary actions mixed with faith.

I wanted to end this summer series with this couple because in many ways they are more like us than any persons we've considered so far.

- They probably came to faith in Jesus when they believed what someone was preaching. They probably didn't have a Road to Damascus experience.
- They probably didn't have an Elijah experiences where God miraculously fed them, nor empowered them to overthrow Baal worship through fire from the sky.

As one commentator summed up their life:

Their home was always open for the Church that met in their house. They were always ready to go wherever God needed them. They were willing to lose themselves in the footnotes of history. But their influence was clearly felt in the greatest cities of their day. Here is an example for any young couple to follow. Citation: William Sanford LaSor, *Great Personalities of the New Testament; Their Lives and Times*, Revell, 1961.P. 146.

Priscilla & Aquila were tentmakers (hard-working blue-collar workers) who offered their gifts for hospitality and teaching to encourage the Apostle Paul, to deepen Apollos' understanding of the Christian faith, to build-up the Church in Rome, Ephesus and Corinth, and to model Christ's calling for Christians to serve one another wherever they find themselves.

Today, before we share the Lords' supper... that blessed sacrament Jesus gave to us only after He took the time to wash His disciple's feet and model for them the servanthood he expects of those who follow him: before we gather at His table, would you take a minute to ask yourself, "How am I serving the people setting around me?" How am I "washing the feet" of others?

Maybe you have ordinary gifts to greet.

Maybe you have ordinary gifts to teacher.

Maybe you have ordinary gifts to encourage.

Maybe you have ordinary gifts to visit.

Maybe you have ordinary gifts to cook.

Maybe you have ordinary gifts to host.

Do you know... have you learned today through Priscilla & Aquila, that when you offer your ordinary gifts to God through faith, God will accomplish extraordinary things?

May we do so, so that God can do so, in the coming year.

AMEN