

## **August 25, 2019 – (Pentecost 12, Priscilla and Aquila)**

### **Sermon Text – Acts 18:1-4, 18-21, 24-28**

- After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. <sup>2</sup>There he found a Jew named Aquila... with his wife Priscilla...and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together—by trade they were tentmakers...After staying there for a considerable time, Paul said farewell to the believers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila...Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos...though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately. -

**One of the unanticipated consequences of our branch of the Lutheran Church's decision to ordain women was the formation of a new thing called clergy couples. The administrators at the time had never imagined that students would come to the seminary, meet each other in classes, fall in love and get married. They did. And, when I was going to school, it was a pretty new thing. Now, I can name nine clergy couples in our synod alone, and that's without even looking at the names on the roster! There may be more. We might say that Priscilla and Aquila were the first, though the term clergy had not yet been invented. We can say they were disciples. In fact, like Barnabas last week, Aquila may have been included in the seventy, who were sent out by Jesus to spread the good news of the kingdom to the local communities in Luke, chapter 10. They were certainly church leaders and they did significant ministry in many ways. That they were a couple is not in dispute. They are mentioned six times in the Bible, and always as a pair. Of those six instances, Aquila is listed first in three of them and Priscilla is listed first in the other three. This indicates to some scholars that they were considered to be equals, a radical idea for the first century in the Roman Empire, with its patriarchal society dominated by men. Apparently, they took Paul's teaching that "in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female," and practiced it in their marriage. In that, they appear to be very modern in their approach to life.**

**Priscilla and Aquila were tentmakers by trade, as was Paul. This commonality, together with their faith, is probably what brought them into contact with one another. Having been ordered out of Rome by the emperor Claudius, Priscilla and Aquila settled at Corinth, in southern Greece. There, Paul met them and stayed with them in their house, which was probably in the same place as their shop. In his novelization of Paul's life, Lutheran pastor and preacher Walter Wangerin imagines that Priscilla and**

Aquila occupied the loft above the workspace, while Paul slept downstairs in the shop. Because they occupied a spot in the marketplace, where there were people coming and going all the time, doing their business or completing their shopping, this gave Paul a wonderful place from which to preach and to engage people in conversation about the Christian faith. Priscilla and Aquila, no doubt, listened, learned and added to the conversation. Their time in Corinth was not without controversy, as a rivalry sprung up between the leaders of the Jewish synagogue and the believers in Jesus who were worshiping next door in the home of a former leader of the synagogue. Soon after this rivalry had erupted into violence and Paul had saved the new leader of the synagogue from a public flogging, he decided to move on to Syria, and he took Priscilla and Aquila with them. One their way, they stopped in Ephesus, on the west coast of present-day Turkey, where Priscilla and Aquila stayed, offering Paul a place to stay whenever he returned to that city.

While in Ephesus, they are treated to the arrival of another Christian preacher, Apollos, who is an eloquent and enthusiastic speaker, who knows the scriptures and has been instructed in the Christian faith. He, however, knows nothing about baptism, except for the old concept of repentance taught by John. Priscilla and Aquila take him aside and explain to him that the church now baptizes “in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,” as an entrance into the kingdom and as a means of salvation. This fuller understanding of the faith, Apollos accepts. And I assume he incorporates it into his future preaching, though we don’t hear much about it. This scene is important however, in that it is often cited as the counterpoint to 1 Timothy 2, in which Paul states, “I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve...” Opponents of the concept of female clergy cling to this verse as their proof that women are not allowed in positions of leadership, as do some evangelical churches today, which bar women from teaching Sunday School or confirmation classes beyond a certain age, lest they be “teaching a man.” Advocates for female clergy see this later writing of Paul as a concession to the culture of his day and cite the fact that in the early church women did hold positions of leadership, did teach men and did enjoy the blessings of God in doing so. Think about Lydia leading the church in Philippi, Lois and Eunice instructing young Timothy, Phoebe overseeing the church in Cenchrea, just down the road from Corinth, and now Priscilla helping Apollos to a fuller understanding of the faith. The evidence seems overwhelming, and supporters of female leadership go on to quote Paul in 1 Corinthians 11, where he writes “Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so

man is now born of woman. And all things are from God." That seems like a statement of equality, a reinforcement of the relationship Paul had observed in the marriage of Priscilla and Aquila.

In his telling of the story, Walter Wangerin amplifies this notion by portraying Priscilla, not only as an equal partner to Aquila, but as a teacher and advisor of Paul himself. As he tells it, Paul had a habit of climbing the hill to the high part of the city in Corinth. As he did so, he passed many shrines along the way built to honor the many pagan, Greek gods and goddesses. When he returned from these daily walks, he always returned upset by the overwhelming popularity of this foreign worship. Where he had spoken positively about this in Athens, saying, "I see how religious you are..." He now finds it depressing, that people persist in following the old ways, regardless of his efforts to bring them the good news of Christ. Priscilla worries about him, telling him that maybe he should stop climbing to the top of the hill, if all it is going to do is upset him so much. Did he listen? Would he have listened? Well, that we really can't know; but, given that Paul accepted Priscilla and Aquila's hospitality, I think that he probably would have appreciated her concern. And maybe, it would have made a difference.

So, what does this mean for us? Well, there are several themes that can carry over into our lives. Hospitality would be one – providing for those who are doing the work of the Lord. Vocation would be another – using our positions or occupations as a way to influence others by living and teaching the faith. Or equality – the one that appeals most to me. I have the privilege of working with many talented women who serve as ordained pastors. They carry on in the finest tradition of Priscilla, and it saddens me when I hear of the obstacles they have to overcome or the difficulties they confront, simply because they are female. That makes no sense to me. They are full partners in proclaiming the gospel. But that is probably because Priscilla and Aquila are numbered among my "Unsung Heroes of the Bible." We complete our series next Sunday, hearing about another of Paul's companions, Titus.

Amen.