

Priscilla: Called to Minister
February 21, 2012
Acts 18:1-3, 18-21, 24-26; Romans 16:3-4

This week's lesson considers one of the most interesting couples in the New Testament, Aquila and Priscilla (Prisca was her more formal name), who were partners in the Apostle Paul's work. They are always mentioned together. In *Acts*, Aquila is mentioned first in the first few verses of Chapter 18, where Luke is first introducing them. But in the following two mentions, Priscilla is named first, as "Priscilla and Aquilla." Paul mentions them both in his closing greetings in three letters, with Aquila named first in *I Corinthians* 16:19, and with Prisca (Priscilla) first in both *Romans* 16:3 and in *II Timothy* 4:19.

Referring to the couple with the woman's name first is remarkable for that day. Yet, for Luke (the author of *Acts*), doing so here is not unique. "Mary and Joseph" is how Luke refers to Jesus's parents in Luke 2:16, the one place I was able to find both referred to together paired like that. Arguably, Mary was more important than Joseph. Just so, we can infer that Luke held Priscilla's role to be more important than that of her husband Aquila. Of the Pauline letters, *I Corinthians* would have been the earliest, followed within two years by *Romans*, with *II Timothy* coming near the end of his life. Paul lists Aquila first in his earliest letter, then puts Prisca (the more formal name for Priscilla) first in the latter two.

Aquila is identified by Luke as a Jew from Pontus, a province on the south shore of the Black Sea well to the east of modern Istanbul. That would be almost on the edge of the Roman empire. Yet Aquila is a Latin name, as is Priscilla. Luke reports that when Paul met them in Corinth, they had recently come from Italy. The Emperor Claudius (ruled 41-54 A.D.) had in A.D. 49 expelled the Jews from Rome. The reason for this act given by the Roman historian Suetonius was that the Jews had been creating disturbances "at the instigation of Chrestus." This is likely a reference to Jesus. It would seem that Christians had reached Rome, and that in their preaching in the synagogues, conflicts arose. This is similar to what happened in many cities that Paul visited. Indeed, Paul's experience in Corinth may give a good parallel. Acts 18:12-17 describes how the Jews brought charges against Paul before the Roman tribunal Gallio. He dismissed the charges, followed by some conflict, and with Paul then leaving for Ephesus. It would seem that Emperor Claudius similarly decided to get rid of the trouble-making Jews in Rome by kicking them all out, Christians as well as others.

So, Aquila and Priscilla had been in Rome, or at least elsewhere in Italy. They had been forced to leave, and took up residence in Corinth. Very likely they were already Christians. They were also both tentmakers, and shared that occupation with Paul. When Paul reached Corinth from Athens, where his success had been at an all-time low, he found with Aquila and Priscilla lodging, work, and a shared faith. Since they were already established there, it seems likely that Paul worked for them, in a business sense. It also seems that Paul found comfort and reassurance, and a change in direction, after his difficulties in Athens. As he would later write to the Corinthians, 2:1 **“When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom [as he had in Athens!] For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. 3 And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling ...”** I can only speculate that both Aquila and Priscilla were a part of Paul’s regrouping and recovery of his confidence. By the time Silas and Timothy arrived (Acts 18:5) Paul was engaged in proclaiming the Word and arguing in the synagogue.

Later, when Paul left Corinth by ship for Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila went with him. There they established a home in which a church met, one of a number of churches in Asia, the province in and around Ephesus. Paul mentions this in I Corinthians 16:19, written a year or more later. Meanwhile Paul left Ephesus to go to Jerusalem for Passover, then to Antioch, then to other churches in Asia Minor and then back to Ephesus (end of his 2nd and start of his 3rd “missionary journey”).

From *Acts* 18:24-28, we know something about what Aquila and Priscilla were doing in Ephesus while Paul was traveling to Jerusalem and back. An Alexandrian Jew named Apollos had come to Ephesus. Luke tells us he was eloquent, well-versed in the scriptures, had been instructed in the Way of the Lord, was enthusiastic, and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus. When he began to speak in the synagogue, we are told “Priscilla and Aquila took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately.” This sounds to me like exactly what they had done for Paul, although in Paul’s case it wasn’t accuracy that was the issue. Alexandria was a major philosophy center, especially for Judaism in the Greek world. It was also a center of gnostic thought. Paul’s appeal to philosophy and reason in Athens had fallen flat, and it may be that Apollos has misconceptions or other problems, maybe even a mix of Gnosticism, in his message. All we are told is that he at that time knew only the Baptism of John. Priscilla and Aquila helped him, just as they had helped Paul in Corinth earlier.

Before Paul got back to Ephesus, Apollos had moved on to Corinth with the endorsement of the church in Ephesus, most likely led by Priscilla and Aquila.

We know that Apollos went on to be an important teacher and evangelist himself. Luke tells us that in Corinth “he greatly helped those who through grace had become believers.” From Paul’s first letters to the Corinthians, we know that those loyal to Apollos formed one of the factions in the divided church. That is about all that seems to be known. What we can conclude is that in helping first Paul and then Apollos, in both cases in the presence of difficulties, Priscilla and Aquila provided important support for these two early Christian evangelists. They were also hosts to a church in their home, which was of considerable importance.

The greetings to Prisca and Aquilla in *Romans* 16 is interesting but has some complications. We read there of Prisca and Aquila “**who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the gentiles. Greet also the church in their house.**” This is at the end of *Romans*. This letter to the Romans was written by Paul from Corinth on his last visit there just before leaving for Jerusalem at the end of his “3rd missionary Journey.” Priscilla and Aquilla had been living in Ephesus and had a church in their house there about this time (as seen in *I Corinthians*, not long before). Had Priscilla and Aquila moved back to Rome? It’s puzzling. Paul seems to have made some trips between Ephesus and Corinth that we can infer from letters, that are not mentioned by Luke in *Acts*. Paul’s teaching and the resulting crisis in Ephesus is described in *Acts* 19:1-41. *Acts* mentions travel to Greece (19:1-6), presumably also including a Corinth, prior to returning to Jerusalem (for the last time) with the offering he has been collecting for the saints there. Did Priscilla and Aquila leave Ephesus about the same time and get to Rome in time to establish a home and host a church there?

Scholars have three hypotheses about *Romans* 16. One is that, indeed, this was part of Paul’s original letter to the Romans, so Priscilla and Aquilla would need to have traveled to Rome before Paul wrote from Corinth just before going to Jerusalem, probably about 52 or 53 A.D. (That would still have been during Claudius’s reign, though some date Paul’s travels later.) It seems odd that Paul knows so long a list of people in Rome, a place he has never visited before. A second hypothesis is that *Romans* 16 was part of a letter from Paul to the church in Ephesus. That would better fit greeting Priscilla and Aquilla there, which is also consistent with the greeting in *II Timothy*, probably written from Rome to Timothy, who was likely in Ephesus at the time.

The third hypothesis is that someone put together Romans 16 and added it later, supposedly to reinforce the authority of the church in Rome.

The earliest still-existing text of Romans puts a separation between Chapter 15 (which ends with the benediction of 16: 25-27) and Chapter 16, as if they were different documents. There were some texts that had no Chapter 16. Some versions, especially those credited to the heretic Maricon, who had his reasons not to like Chapter 15, had neither Chapter 15 nor Chapter 16 (but with the doxology of 16: 24-27). So, while the third hypothesis is favored somewhat among scholars, none of these hypotheses are fully satisfactory. I like the second hypothesis, that what we have in Romans 16 comes from a letter to Ephesus, and that Priscilla and Aquila remained there as important pillars of the church. Later the church at Ephesus became associated with the apostle John, who legend says moved there with Mary, the mother of Jesus. It is from Ephesus that John most likely wrote the epistles, and it is from the nearby island of Patmos that John wrote the Revelation and the letters included in that book to various churches in Asia. It was also to Ephesus that two of the daughters of Philip were said to have come.

Romans 16 mentions also that Priscilla and Aquila risked their necks for Paul. This has to mean that they put their very lives in jeopardy. That shows not just service and encouragement, but bravery and loyalty. We can only make guesses at the particulars. This must have been in either Corinth or Ephesus, more likely Ephesus. The crisis in Ephesus seems more dangerous. It's hard to know, since trouble sprang up wherever Paul went, and Luke does not detail it all.

I can only speculate that Priscilla and Aquila continued their faithful and supportive ministry, likely in Ephesus, throughout the time after the New Testament no longer reports their activities. Certainly the blessings of their support, encouragement, teaching and counseling would have benefitted members of the church well beyond the two instances Luke tells us of in Acts: Paul and Apollos. Is it not that way for many faithful Christians? They labor anonymously and helpfully for the sake of others, seeking no credit or benefit to themselves. I can think of many, many examples I have known, in our church and others.

But returning to what we remarked on first, by the time Paul writes his letters to the Romans and to Timothy, and by the time Luke writes *Acts*, it is "Priscilla and Aquila," with Priscilla given priority. This can't be an accident. We don't know

what distinguished Priscilla's work and blessings sufficiently for first Paul then Luke to list them in this order, extraordinary for that time.

Something else is worth mentioning. One of the great mysteries of the bible, probably forever unknowable, is who wrote the book *Hebrews*. One of the candidates put forth is Priscilla. Another is Apollos. Most scholars agree that while much is consistent with Paul's doctrine, there are style and doctrinal differences that make Paul an unlikely author. Of people we know about who have been suggested, Apollos and Priscilla are perhaps the two strongest candidates. Either way, Priscilla would be an important contributor. An interesting related inscription found in Corinth by archaeologists datable to Paul's time reads, "Synagogue of the Hebrews." (*Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 10, p241). Might the letter *To the Hebrews* have actually been addressed to the members of that synagogue?

As with most women in the Bible, we just don't have as much information as we would like! But what we can infer is that Priscilla, as well as her husband Aquila, played an important role in the life and ministry of Paul, Apollos, and no doubt many more. That Priscilla's role was particularly important is marked only by her name being mention first, especially in the later writings, where the inertia of precedent and convention had to be reversed for that to happen.

We are fortunate to know about Priscilla and Aquila by name. So many important characters are not named, like the woman at the well, or the wise woman of Beth-Abel. In Priscilla's case, we can also see clear evidence of her importance. But, what of the evangelist, unknown to the Bible and to history, who first brought the gospel to Rome? Whoever that was in never mentioned, and completely lost to history. That witness is how Priscilla and Aquila would first hear of this trouble-making "Chrestus," and become followers of The Way. By being expelled from Italy, they ultimately became partners of Paul when he perhaps most needed help in his ministry. So much of God's work takes place anonymously, as people live and show God's love in their lives. Luke's *Acts* and the writings of Paul give us just a partial picture of what God was doing in that time, as if a few snapshots in an epic. We are likewise part of that epic history too, in how we live and help each other in these days and times.

Prayer: *Creator of men and women, thank you for the diversity of Paul's partners in ministry. Help us learn from Priscilla, one of Paul's colleagues and friends. Amen.* [P.S.: And Aquila too; they were a team!]