

## *Friends in Marriage and Ministry: Priscilla and Aquila*

Fifth Sunday of Easter – May 9, 2004

### Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

*Ecclesiastes 4:9-10*

<sup>9</sup>Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. <sup>10</sup>For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help.

*Acts 18:1-4*

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. <sup>2</sup>There he found 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, <sup>3</sup>and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together—by trade they were tentmakers. <sup>4</sup>Every sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks.

*Romans 16:1-5b*

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.

<sup>3</sup>Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, <sup>4</sup>and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. <sup>5</sup>Greet also the church in their house.

*Today, in the fourth sermon of our Friendship and Faithfulness series, we look at a married couple, Priscilla and Aquila who, after fleeing Rome, became an important part of Paul's ministry and their own.*

The riots had gone on too long. The Emperor barely tolerated the Jews as it was. Now, he had been pushed too far; Caesar ordered their expulsion from Rome. Priscilla, Aquila, their friends and neighbors . . . all of them. As they fled, they had little hope of ever returning.

*Making a new home*

In the days of Jesus and Paul, Jews lived throughout the Roman Empire, from Syria in the east to Spain in the west. Even Rome itself had a substantial Jewish population of perhaps 40,000 or so. The Romans generally left such Jews alone. To the average Roman, the Jews seemed more peculiar than threatening. The Jews believed that there was only one god (yeah, sure) and that this god had chosen them (how silly a thought). The Jews took off work on Saturdays (nice if you can get it!) and avoided all sorts of foods. They even performed some strange rite of physical mutilation on their newborn males. But . . . so long as the peace was kept, the Romans left the Jews in peace.

Keeping the peace was important throughout the empire. Controlling millions of conquered peoples was no small task. But nowhere was this peacekeeping more highly prized than in Rome and in 49AD the peace in Rome came crashing down. Suetonius<sup>1</sup>, a Roman biographer of the times, wrote "Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius, the Caesar] expelled them from Rome." His reference to "Chrestus" is

#### Jewish-Christians?

For many of us, Jews and Christians are in two separate categories that we don't mix together. So when we read in the New Testament about Jewish-Christians and Gentile-Christians it can be rather confusing.

ALL the first followers of Jesus (Christians, we call them) were Jews who embraced Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. They placed their faith in Christ but never understood themselves to be giving up their Jewishness; instead, Jesus was the culmination of Israel's story, not a replacement for it. Paul was such a Jew. As the movement spread across the empire, increasing numbers of Gentiles (non-Jews) came to faith in Jesus, worshiping alongside the Jewish-Christians. With time, the number of Gentiles overwhelmed the number of Jews in the movement.

<sup>1</sup>Suetonius lived and wrote about 100 years after Jesus. This quote is from his *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*.

probably a reference to Christ. Evidently, followers of Jesus had come to Rome preaching Christ in the Jewish synagogues, triggering a violent response from many Jews. After all, something much like this happened nearly everywhere Paul traveled in the eastern end of the empire.

So, the Jews left Rome, forbidden to return. This would have included Jews who had become followers of Jesus, such as the married couple, Priscilla<sup>2</sup> and Aquila. They were better off than many. They had a portable business; they were tentmakers. They owned property. Priscilla even had had some family money. So they headed east toward the large, bustling Greek metropolis of Corinth. Corinth was a busy, commercial port on a narrow isthmus. There, Priscilla and her husband set up shop in a storefront and began to rebuild their lives.

Not long after their arrival in Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila met a fellow Jew who had come to Corinth to proclaim the gospel, the Good News, of Jesus Christ. His name was Paul. The three of them quickly formed a close bond, for Paul was a tentmaker too. Priscilla and her husband invited Paul to join them in their storefront business and for the next eighteen months the three of them grew their business and grew the young Christian house churches in Corinth. (see Acts 18:1-18)

#### *Moving on*

Priscilla and Aquila were mature Christians when they left Rome. In Corinth, they committed themselves fully to Paul's work and the building of God's kingdom. When Paul decided that it was time for him to leave Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila left with him. All three made their way to Ephesus, another very important city. Priscilla and Aquila stayed there while Paul went on to Jerusalem. Not surprisingly, they quickly became leaders in the Christian community in Ephesus. Once, a well-meaning Jew named Apollos came to Ephesus teaching about Jesus and God's kingdom as best he could. But his teachings about Jesus were a little confused and inaccurate. Priscilla and her husband took him aside and taught him the full truth about Jesus and the new way. With their guidance and encouragement, Apollos went on to be an effective teacher and leader among the churches in Greece. (see Acts 18:24-28)

#### *Going home*

Priscilla and Aquila stayed in Ephesus for several years. Paul would mention them when he wrote a letter back to Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 16:9). But they never lost their desire to return to Rome. After all, it was their home, where they had been raised, where they had met and married. In 54AD, Claudius died and his edict expelling the Jews from Rome died with him.<sup>3</sup> So, Priscilla and her husband returned to Rome where they would carry on their kingdom building work. Later, when Paul was in Corinth a second time, he wrote a letter to the Christians in Rome urging them to find unity as the Jewish-Christians returned. In this letter, Paul sent a poignant hello to Priscilla and Aquila, noting that they had "risked their necks" for Paul and his work (Romans 16:3-4). But even though they were back in Rome, their work was not done. There were many house churches in Rome that needed help and encouragement. Later, it seems that they again headed for Asia Minor to work for the spread of the Good News of Jesus Christ (see 2 Timothy 4:19).

#### *Two lives committed to marriage and ministry*

There are no extended stories about Priscilla and Aquila in the New Testament. Rather, their presence and service are woven into the accounts of Paul's ministry and their own. We meet them in the correspondence of the movement. We see that they were leaders in the early church and trusted co-workers of Paul, confident enough to instruct a respected teacher and preacher. They are always mentioned together and Priscilla is nearly always mentioned first! Though Paul saw advantage in his own singleness (1 Corinthians 7:32-35), we see in this couple that two disciples, committed to one another through the bonds of marriage, can work powerfully for the building of God's kingdom, always supporting, encouraging, and loving each other.

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<sup>2</sup>She is referred to as Priscilla in the book of Acts, though Paul refers to her as Prisca in his letters. Think of this as "Katherine" and "Kate."

<sup>3</sup>When a Caesar died, many of his edicts would automatically expire unless renewed by his successor.

## Daily Bible Readings

*(all the NT passages mentioning Priscilla and Aquila)*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Day 1 Acts 18:1-17 We meet Priscilla and Aquila when they are in Corinth</b></p>	<p><b>Day 2 Acts 18:24-28 While in Ephesus, they teach Apollos more about the gospel of Christ.</b></p>
<p><b>Day 3 1 Corinthians 13:26 Paul's final greeting to the Corinthians, including a greeting from Priscilla and Aquila (v.19)</b></p>	<p><b>Day 4 Romans 16 Paul's greetings (his 'hellos') to the Christians in Rome, including his hello to Priscilla and Aquila (v. 3-4).</b></p>
<p><b>Day 5 2 Timothy 2:19-22 Another "say hello" to Prisca and Aquila</b></p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

## Sermon Notes

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### May Book Recommendation

*Why I am a United Methodist*, by William Willimon

Whenever someone asks me how they can learn something about John Wesley and United Methodism, I urge them to begin with this slender volume. In seven chapters, Professor Willimon introduces us to John Wesley, to the importance of the Bible in our denomination, to our practical theology, and more. As always, Willimon is thoughtful, heartfelt, and plain-spoken.

Available now at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

We don't really know much about Priscilla and Aquila. Did they have children? Did they marry for love? How old were they? We can no more than guess at the answers to such questions. But we do know this: together, they worked hard to build up several Christian communities; their "appearances" in the NT span many years and several cities.

This is a couple who gave themselves completely to the work of the kingdom. I think they would have understood that the marriage of two disciples is a covenant between them, a covenant made before God. In his book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Richard Hays writes that in the NT, marriage is an aspect of discipleship and reflects God's own faithfulness, grounded not so much in the feelings of love but in the practice of love. We can be sure that during Priscilla and Aquila's many years of ministry, their own relationship had its ups and downs (what marriage doesn't!). They were confronted with enormous difficulties. How many of us have ever been "expelled" from our homes and cities? They lived in a world where most people never moved more than 30 miles from where they were born, yet Priscilla and Aquila traveled across the Roman Empire, setting up new homes and businesses and congregations . . . all for the sake of the gospel.

What does it mean to you to speak of marriage as an aspect of discipleship? Last week, we saw that Jonathan and David, two soul mates, were bound in a covenant. How does the covenant of marriage differ from the soul-bonding of Jonathan and David? If we embrace marriage as a reflection of God's own faithfulness, what might that say to us about the meaning and practice of being married? Make a list of some practices that Priscilla and Aquila might have used to help them stay faithful friends in marriage.