

Priscilla and Aquila

Acts 18:1-10 by Patty Friesen (Sept 2/18)

Since Paul and Barnabus' split-up in Acts 15, Paul and Silas have been travelling around Turkey and Greece preaching the Good Word. Chapter 18 marks a change in Paul's ministry from travelling missionary work to now in Corinth, Paul is more like a settled pastor, able to engage in extensive teaching and nurturing in blossoming young Christian communities. Corinth is south of Athens and in the commercial crossroads of Greece where it has become the hub of the worst elements of the Roman empire, so much so that the expression "to Corinthianize" has been coined to describe a life of debauchery. Corinth has a large temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love where a thousand religious prostitutes lead religious rites. Corinth also has a large Jewish population and an established synagogue where Paul teaches. Paul spends quite a bit teaching the Corinthians in his first and second letters, discussing sexual ethics and loyalty to Christ above any other religious or political loyalty. It is a paradigm shift for Corinthian Jews and Gentiles alike to shift their political and religious and sexual values.

In Corinth Paul ceases to serve as the leader of a well-defined team and works more collaboratively with people whom he meets locally. Silas and Timothy disappear from the scene and Paul meets fellow tentmakers Priscilla and Aquila. Paul is part of an artisan guild of tentmakers who provide friendship and financial support and within this guild, he seeks out work and faith colleagues in husband-wife team, Priscilla and Aquila. Aquila and Priscilla are Jews who are cast out of Rome, perhaps because of their conversion to Christianity. We assume they are already converted because we do not hear of their conversion story. And while they are listed in today's passage and in 1

Corinthians 16:19 as Aquila and Priscilla, elsewhere in Acts, Romans and 2 Timothy, they are referred to as Priscilla and Aquila. This may indicate that she is the one who takes the lead in the church that meets in their home. They are a solid teaching team later in Acts 18 when they instruct the enthusiastic Apollos more accurately about the Way of God. Priscilla provides the practical example of how leadership evolved in the early church despite later words of Paul around women's position of silence in the church.

Paul couldn't have gotten anywhere in his ministry if it hadn't been from the initial mentorship of Barnabus, and then the partnering with Silas and Timothy and then this collaboration with Priscilla and Aquila, Titius Justus, Crispus and later Apollos. It reminds us of the Beatles song, "I get by with a little help from my friends." Particularly as Paul travels to Jerusalem where he is arrested for preaching in the temple and put on trial like Jesus for the remaining chapters of Acts, Paul's friends continue to take care of him in jail and the work of the church goes on without Paul.

In this work by Rembrandt of Paul in prison, we see that he is deep in thought and perhaps a bit of doubt? The sword of truth is beside him as he writes long epistles and his shoe is removed because he is on holy ground, touching the rock of his faith. The window of light, illuminates his cell and his work which is now no longer teaching and preaching but writing letters to the believers scattered throughout the Roman Empire in Thessalonica, Philippi, Corinth, Ephesus, Colossae, Galatia.

Next to Jesus and the four Gospels, Apostle Paul is the most significant shaper of Christianity. He has written half of the books in the New Testament, 13 of the 26. Paul was educated in Jewish law which made him the perfect communicator to Jewish

people. He was a fundamentalist, a literalist and a zealot, willing to kill for his faith until his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus - perhaps one of the most dramatic conversions in history - comparable to Hitler converting to Judaism or Stalin becoming a Mennonite! Paul was also educated in Greek language, philosophy and culture which made him an excellent communicator to the Gentiles.

Paul focused his mission on cities that were the capitals of the Roman provinces; Tarsus of Cilicia, Antioch of Syria, Thessalonica of Macedonia, Corinth of Achaia, Ephesus of Asia Minor because these were the highest concentrations of population, trade and learning and represented the greatest diversity of people. While Paul always visited the synagogues first, he looked for God worshippers whoever they would be, whether in the tent-making shop or praying by the river. Paul did not simply convert individuals. He created new communities of believers in Christ that had to learn to live together in new ways by worshipping and eating together and practicing the characteristics of Christ in goodness, humility, kindness and self-control. Through Christ, individuals became new creatures that lived out their lives in community with each other.

Paul repeatedly shares his conversion experience to all, gaining credibility as one of the original apostles who met Christ personally himself. That he would claim that this crucified criminal was God and Ruler over all, was blasphemous to Jews and treasonous to Gentiles. Paul used his persecutions to help new Christians understand that as Jesus suffered, so too will his followers suffer. From his final prison in Rome, Paul used his cell to help translate the mysteries of Christian faith into simple words, setting forth the example of his own life, saying, "I have learned in whatever state I am

in, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I now how to abound, in all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things through the one who strengthens me. Philippians 4.

Paul didn't accomplish all of this work on his own. In the book of Romans alone, he credits 40 other people who helped him in his work. We don't know exactly what happened to Paul in the end in Rome. It was believed that he was beheaded under Nero in AD 69. It is recorded in the Martyr's Mirror that Paul's friends Priscilla and Aquila were also martyred by Nero in 70 AD. Christians continued to be executed for sport in the coliseum by gladiators and lions until 316 AD when Emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity and was baptized. Constantine called together the Council of Nicea to formulate a creed that held together the most important things about Jesus and to form the New Testament Canon with the four gospels and the letters of Paul and others added to the Old Testament which makes up our holy scriptures today. Paul is still very important to Christianity but within the context of other scriptures, especially the gospels. We must always weigh his words against Christ's.

While Paul is the biggest shaper of early Christianity, how does he still matter to us today? What would he say to us at Osler Mennonite, a small community of faith, wedged between the North and South Saskatchewan Rivers? I think Paul would care about us as much as he cared about his other small faith communities scattered throughout the Roman Empire. I think Paul would encourage us to be faithful and to continue to reach out to the modern day Gentiles among us. I think he would remind us to be loyal to Christ above other loyalties. I think he would tell us it is not merely enough to have faith but to also have hope and love, the greatest of these being love. Let us pray...

Thank you God for Apostle Paul and for his influence even today. Thank you for his example of breaking down barriers between people and his example of collaboration and trusted friendship. Thank you for his words of comfort and challenge. Thank you for his passion for Christ and help us to live as faithfully and passionately as he did.

Amen.