

Priscilla: Teacher of the Way
Acts 18:1-4;24-28
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Teachers are amazing. I think all of us can remember one or more teachers from our past that have made a lasting impact on our lives. For me, I especially remember and admire Mrs. Long, my fourth-grade teacher. She taught me some important life skills, especially the importance of positive praise. We all are familiar with put-downs. When people constantly point out what you are doing wrong or pointing out your flaws. If that is all you hear you can develop a lack of self-esteem and become discouraged or worse. Mrs. Long taught us about put downs and challenged us to do put-ups instead. That term “put-up” stuck with me and it means simply to find something about the other that lifts them up instead of knocking them down.

She said when we are tempted to take a jab or criticize someone especially if it was to hurt or shame someone, we needed to find something good and share a put-up instead. Good advice that speaks to me still today, some fifty years later. In a world where bullying, harsh criticism and discrediting of others seems to be popular in society, it can be challenging to look for the good in others and lift that up. In elementary school kids could be mean and get a cheap laugh from others by putting someone down. Her lessons and encouragement to speak positively instead of negatively about others helped me through the worst years of school for me, my middle school years. Sure, I had other teachers that taught me great things, built me up, gave me confidence, showed me I was talented, even helped me to be my quirky, weird self, but Mrs. Long did all of that and then some.

Teachers do something amazing. The best teachers help us to view the world differently, to be inquisitive, adventurous, and to keep learning and growing. Learning to look for the good in others also helped me remain curious instead of judgmental. It

helped me to look beyond the mean behavior of others and ask, “why are they acting this way” and to try and understand them. It’s not always easy, but it is a practice that gives life.

Priscilla from our reading today was also a remarkable teacher. Now we don’t know that much about her as an individual besides the few sentences we read today. This was the case for many women who are named in the New Testament.

Priscilla and Aquila clearly appear to be equal partners in ministry and life. They are named only six times in the New Testament and are always together. Her name appears first, most likely as a sign of honor or recognition of her primary role in the house churches they led. Sometimes she is called Priscilla and other times Prisca, a more formal version of her name. They are named in three different cities, Rome, Ephesus and Corinth before they return to Rome to lead the church there. Besides this passage in the book of Acts, they receive greetings from Paul in 1 Corinthians, 2 Timothy and at the end of Romans where Paul names six prominent women who are leaders in the church, including Priscilla.

Now I realize that some people like to use Paul’s words to justify the argument that woman should not be pastors or leaders in the church. Yet again and again we see Paul naming actual women leaders, including Pheobe as an apostle (Romans 16:1), and praising them for their extensive work as leaders in the church. There is plenty of evidence in the New Testament that women played important roles in church leadership including preaching, funding and spreading the Gospel. Today’s passage is near the beginning of Paul’s ministry, before the church was seen as separate from its Jewish beginnings. Like many religious movements, Christianity started as a sect, or a particular school of Jewish teaching based on Jesus’ teachings as a Rabbi or Teacher of the Torah. It was known as “The Way” as we hear it referred to here, “The Way of our Lord”.

From this passage and a few other places where the title “The Way” shows up, we know “The Way” began at Pentecost, proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah and may have drawn from Jesus’ words when he said, “I am the Way the truth and the life”. “The Way” taught the message of God’s forgiveness and Grace, there were two baptisms one for repentance and receiving the Holy Spirit. It was called “The Way” because the apostles and others continued to perform miracles and practice Jesus’ way of living. Later on, it became known as Christian actually little Christ’s as a diminutive way of describing this new sect coming out of Jerusalem.

Priscilla and Aquila hear Apollos preaching what sounds like “The Way”, but he has some things wrong. They could have been harsh and labeled him as a hypocrite, a false teacher, a heretic and warned the church not to accept him as a member of their community. They could have put him down and blocked him out of fear, but instead they embraced him and helped him grow in his understanding and gifts as a preacher. He was, as some would say, “On fire for Jesus” and you want to support that enthusiasm not stifle it. They coached and trained him in the deeper things of faith that he had not learned. They encouraged the community to also embrace and support Apollos as he became grounded in his faith and in the community. When he was ready, the community, not just Priscilla and Aquila, commissioned Apollos to take the Good News to new places.

This is the model of the Church when it is functioning at its best. We see the best in people, the gifts and fire people have and encourage it. We bring the community around to support and teach one another in the teachings of Christ. To continue to practice being a loving, generous, faith filled and hopeful people. Remember how Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 “Three things remain: faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love.”

Priscilla and Aquila were the founding pastors of the Corinthian church so we can assume that Paul’s words in the first letter to the Corinthian church was his attempt to

remind the church of Priscilla's teachings and help them come together in love instead of fighting over things that divided them. The body of Christ is called to support and love one another to do the work of Christ and to see our shortcomings as opportunities to grow in knowledge and grace.

I am grateful for the many women of the faith that were trail blazers pushing against the misogyny that tried to hold them back. Paul, Aquila, Apollos and others affirmed Priscilla with her gifts to start churches and proclaim the good news. Yet still today some churches refuse to allow women in the pulpit, as we heard the Southern Baptist Convention again reaffirm this restriction at their national meeting in Indianapolis. But I praise God that I serve a denomination that has been ordaining women since 1852. Antoinette Brown grew up in the congregational church in Henrietta NY. She petitioned Oberlin college in Ohio to allow her to study for the ministry, which they eventually did. In 1852 she was called to pastor South Butler Congregational church in New York and was officially ordained.

Rev. Brown Blackwell went on to work other social concerns as abolition of slavery, women's right to vote, temperance movement and the right for women to hold public office. She lived long enough to see the Amendment 19 passed in 1920 at the age of 95, giving women the right to vote. Today we celebrate the ongoing legacy of women in ministry and the unique gifts of preaching and teaching they bring to our congregations and our world.

Let us be like Priscilla, Antoinette Brown, and other women throughout the ages and walk fully into God's calling in our lives regardless of the negative voices that try to deny women equality and the liberty to pursue their dreams and their callings in Christ.