

Priscilla and Aquila: Spiritual Mentors

Acts 18:1-4; 24-28

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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When I graduated from college I accepted a call to serve as a Director of Christian Education and Youth Ministry in a Southern California church. I was 21, and when it came to Christian education and youth ministry, I was as ignorant as a door post. Yes, I had grown up in Sunday school, but I knew next to nothing about curriculum and pedagogy. And, yes, I had been active in a youth group, but I knew next to nothing about adolescent psychology or the training of advisors. Before long, however, Roland and Martha Wiskus spotted my shortcomings and took me under their wing. They had served in that church for many years. So they knew not only what to do, but how to do it, and with wisdom and gentle tact they taught me the fine art of ministry. I left two years later to enroll in seminary, but Roland and Martha are among my unsung heroes and heroines because they took the time to mentor a young, inexperienced, but eager-to-succeed pastor.

Priscilla and Aquila played that role for another young man who was eager to succeed. When the pastor nominating committee in Ephesus recommended Apollos to be their new pastor, his résumé was superb. He had grown up in a cosmopolitan city, Alexandria. He was eloquent. He was well versed in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. He spoke with burning enthusiasm. He taught accurately the things concerning Jesus. He spoke boldly in the synagogue. What more could you expect from a pastor?

But Priscilla and Aquila sensed that while nothing was lacking, more could be expected. So, says our text, "they took him aside and explained the way of God to him more accurately." That's the role of a mentor: to help someone who is already competent to be more competent; to encourage someone who is already doing a good job to do a better job; to instruct someone who already knows a lot to know a lot more.

Our text doesn't explicitly say what Apollos needed, but it does give us a hint: Apollos "knew only the baptism of John." John the Baptist had been a major influence on Apollos. And, no doubt, Apollos modeled his ministry after John. And what do we know of John's ministry? John was a fiery evangelist who dangled people over the flames of hell to make them repent and be baptized. Here's a sample of his preaching: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." That's stern stuff, so if Apollos modeled his ministry on John, he too must have been a stern preacher.

Friends in Scottsdale gave me a tee shirt a few years ago. On the front was a picture of Dalmatians attending a church service. A tall Dalmatian stands in the pulpit, pointing his paw at the congregation and saying "Bad dog, bad dog!" And the caption reads, "Hell-fire and Dalmatians." In the annals of preaching, "hell-fire and damnation" has a long history, but, unfortunately, it's short on grace. So Priscilla and Aquila took Apollos aside and "explained the way of God to him more accurately." Apollos already knew the Word of God. What he needed to know was the way of God, that is, the proper manner in which to convey the Word of God. He already knew the law of God; what he needed was to be schooled in the grace of God. Perhaps Priscilla and Aquila used Jesus' parable of the prodigal son for their first lesson. Because when the prodigal came home after squandering his life in the far country, there were no lectures, no threats, no punishment. There was, instead, a party. There was joy, happiness, and delight. Reconciliation, not retribution, is the key to that parable because grace, not guilt, is at the heart of Jesus' ministry. Perhaps their second lesson focused on the woman caught in adultery, and on the clergy who insisted that she be stoned to death because that's what the law demanded. They brought her to Jesus, daring him to contradict the law. Jesus replied, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." After they had all shamefacedly walked away, Jesus asked, "'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'neither do I condemn you, Go your way, and

from now on do not sin again." Mercy, not malice, is the key to that episode, because clemency, not cruelty, is at the heart of Jesus' ministry. Perhaps in their final lesson Priscilla and Aquila reminded Apollos that while hanging on the cross Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." Can there be any doubt that the Father answered that prayer, that God forgave Jesus' executioners? Salvation, not damnation, flows from the cross, because forgiveness, not censure, is at the heart of Jesus' ministry.

I don't really know what Priscilla and Aquila told Apollos, but give him credit: he listened. He wasn't so enamored of his gifts, or so impressed by his diplomas that he was unwilling to sit at the feet of two laypersons from his congregation. And here is the result of their mentoring: "When (Apollos) wished to cross over to Achaia, the believers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. On his arrival he greatly helped those who through grace had become believers." Who through grace: I believe those words are meant to suggest that Apollos, in addition to all his other attributes, had now become a grace-filled minister. Still eloquent. Still speaking boldly. But now so devoid of judgment and so full of grace that he helped those who through grace had become believers.

I grew up in a church where every service ended with an altar call, and every altar call was preceded by some frightening story designed to scare us into going forward when the pastor gave the invitation. I vividly recall a visiting evangelist who told the story of a young man who had left a service in some other city without responding to Christ and who, while driving home, was hit by a train and killed. A lot of us went forward that night! Not because we wanted to, but because we were scared not to! But is that the kind of God we worship, a God who kills people if they turn their backs on Jesus Christ? And in my ministry, would have to frighten people into faith? Thank God for a spiritual mentor named Ben Jennings. Ben was the pastor of the church where I served between my college and seminary years. Ben preached the Gospel with deep conviction and with great civility. He did his best to persuade people to follow Christ, but he never stooped to scare tactics. Ben, too, is in my hall of unsung heroes and heroines because, by word and example, he chipped away at the rough edges of my ministry.

Again, that's what mentors do in the main: they chip away at our rough edges and help us hone our skills. They mold us into channels of God's grace, and make us worthy of people's trust. Not every teacher or supervisor can mentor us. All of us have worked for persons who are intelligent, talented, well-educated, and articulate. Unfortunately, some of them are intelligent and arrogant, talented and overbearing, well-educated and proud of it, articulate and opinionated. And because they don't have the manners to go with their minds, they squander their gifts and forfeit their promise. Don't let that happen to you. Find a mentor like Priscilla. Align yourself with someone like Aquila. Get together once a week so you can probe that person's wisdom and draw on their expertise. Share with them your frustrations and let them counsel you out of the reservoir of their experience.

Ultimately, of course, there is only one who is good enough, strong enough, and wise enough to qualify as our mentor: Jesus Christ. This summer, I intend to reconnect with Jesus Christ by re-reading the four Gospels. I'm going to pray that the living Christ will mentor me as I walk with him from the sunny uplands of Galilee to the rocky hills of Judea, from the cradle to the cross. Will you join me on that journey? There's no telling where Christ will take us or what he will teach us, but I know this for sure: by following Jesus, we won't squander our gifts. By obeying Jesus, we won't forfeit our promise.