

“Three For One”

Liturgical Date: Commemoration of Aquila, Priscilla, and Apollos (February 13)

Primary Text: Acts 18:1-4, 18-28

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the Commemoration of Aquila, Priscilla, and Apollos, is the Epistle Lesson from Acts 18. The title of the sermon is “Three For One.”

When you hear that phrase “three for one”, perhaps you are thinking of some type of great sale. What a deal! However, today you get this on the Church Calendar. February 13 is the commemoration day for three New Testament Saints who were partners in ministry with St. Paul the Apostle: the married couple of Aquila and Priscilla and a man named Apollos. All three of these individuals were converts from Judaism to following Jesus. They were all part of the one mission of sharing the Gospel, serving the one Triune God.

Our text from Acts 18 provides an overview of their ministry. They are also mentioned in other New Testament books as well: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Timothy, and Titus. Their role is long-term and important. They were all very well-traveled, especially for people of this time. They were willing to go anywhere that that Lord would use them in His mission.

As I stated a moment ago, Aquila and his wife Priscilla were a team in serving the Lord. Priscilla is also sometimes referred to by her formal name of Prisca. Her prominence is demonstrated in that she is on a couple of occasions even listed first when she and her husband are named. We are not to twist this into some round-about argument for women pastors, as some modern people

have. Rather it shows her important role in actively serving the Lord alongside her husband. Additionally, inscriptions have been found in the Roman catacombs speaking of a “Priscilla” who was from a distinguished family of high standing in the city. We are not told of her birthplace, but we know that her and Aquila were in Rome (more on that in a moment).

We are told in Acts 18 verse 2 that Aquila was born in Pontus, which was in Asia Minor-modern day Turkey. He ended up in Rome, Italy, but both he and Priscilla, along with other Jews, would be expelled from Rome. The Roman historian Seutonius recorded Jewish people being exiled from Rome by Emperor Claudius in 49 AD. He wrote that they were squabbling over a “Chrestus”- probably a reference to how some of the Jews were coming to believe that Jesus was the Messiah and others were not, thus causing a problematic conflict. But as we know God does, God can even use exile for His purposes.

Aquila and Priscilla ended up in Corinth, in the province of Achaia, Greece. Corinth was a large, diverse, and important port city at this time-even casting a shadow over near-by Athens in terms of population and importance in this era. It is here where they encounter St. Paul. The Apostle Paul comes to Corinth upon leaving Athens (v1) and begins to preach the Gospel to both Jew and Gentile in this city (v4). He meets these two Christians who are already there and they immediately had something in common. All three of them were tentmakers by trade. In fact, Paul would end up living with Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth. One can just imagine these three sitting and sewing their pieces of leather as they conversed and taught each other. This connection and place to stay was used by God as Paul who spend at least 1.5 years in Corinth witnessing and planting the church there.

The reading picks up in verse 18 and St. Paul will leave Corinth, and guess who comes with him? You got it: Priscilla and Aquila. They end up in Ephesus and their mission work continues there, and they stayed in Ephesus after Paul would leave. Remember that groups of believers at this time did not have permanent what we would think of as church buildings today. They were essentially house churches where the congregation of believers would meet in someone's home that was large enough to host them. The Bible tells that Priscilla and Aquila's home was where they met as they ministered in Ephesus (1 Corinthians 16:19), Rome (Romans 16:3-5), then back to Ephesus again (2 Timothy 4:19). The Bible does not tell us how Aquila and Priscilla died or when. There are different traditions, two of which have them dying as martyrs in different places-but we don't know for sure. But we do know that they served the Lord mightily, wherever He sent them.

Now what of Apollos? He also enters the Biblical narrative in Acts 18, verse 24 to be exact. Like Aquila and Priscilla, he was also an ethnic Jew who had come to believe in Jesus. He was also somewhat of "globetrotter". He was from North Africa: Alexandria, Egypt. Apollos was also a disciple of John the Baptist, as verse 25 says he knew "only the baptism of John", thus he would have spent time in Israel around the time of Jesus. He ends up in Ephesus where we are introduced to him in Acts. He then moves onto to Corinth and is mentioned by name twice in the book of 1 Corinthians (1:12 and 3:6). St. Paul also references Apollos in Titus 3:13 as well.

What kind of man was Apollos? I would say the description of him in verse 24 is pretty glowing, "*an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures.*" Noting that he was from Alexandria was significant in that it was a great center of learning.

Almost certainly a man like Apollos would have been educated in the Jewish Scripture as well as rhetoric there. Verse 25 says that *“he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord”* and verse 26 states *“And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue”*. Apollos was a powerful teacher, preacher, and leader in the Early Church. In fact, when he is referenced in 1 Corinthians 1, St. Paul is admonishing the church at Corinth because they had divided into factions and one of the factions was people following Apollos. The Apostle wisely urges these people to not follow an earthly teacher-even himself or Apollos-more than they follow Christ. Furthermore, the important work that Apollos does is highlighted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:6 in this great verse for missions: *“I (Paul) have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase.”* With all of these qualifications it is no wonder that Martin Luther, and other scholars as well, have believed the Apollos was the author of the Book of Hebrews. We don't know for sure who the human author of Hebrews was, but it certainly could have been Apollos.

I want to focus on where Apollos and Aquila and Priscilla intersect for a key practical application of this text. We heard the high praise for Apollos in knowledge and boldness earlier, but let's pick up with the end of verse 25 and then onto verse 26, *“knowing only the baptism of John. And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly.”* What the text is telling us here is that Aquila and Priscilla noticed when Apollos spoke there were still some things that he needed to “get up to speed” on. Especially he needed some instruction, some catechesis, on Christian Baptism as he only knew about the Baptism of John the Baptist-which of course was for repentance. Aquila and Priscilla bring Apollos in and taught him more about the way of God. Now he

would be ready as he went forward in his ministry into Achaia and *“For he mightily convinced the Jews, and that publicly sharing by the Scriptures that Jesus was Christ.”* (v28)

We can learn a lot from this. When someone needs to be corrected, whether it is a theological issue or something else-there is a right way and a wrong way to do it. For example, if anyone ever has an issue with something I say in a sermon whether maybe I just didn't put it clearly or you think I was uninformed about something, you can talk to me about it. But it is probably not best to challenge the pastor on a point in the greeting line. Whatever your field is or things you know a good bit about, chances are you don't like to be told you don't know what you are talking about in front of a bunch of people. I don't see that is what Aquila and Priscilla did. The Bible says *“they took him unto them”*, most likely into their home which served as a gathering point for the Christians and they taught him privately. That is one end of the equation in that we can learn from Aquila and Priscilla how to correct and teach in a Christian manner.

And then what if we are in the position of Apollo, and someone recognizes (or at least believes they do) a deficiency on our part? Part of being a Christian, just like being part of a family, is being able to accept instruction and even admonition from our brothers and sisters. In fact, on the membership application for our congregation it says that one will *“submit to Christian admonition.”* We must recognize that we don't know everything, even in fields where we are pretty competent. Now it may turn out that we are right after all, but we should still listen to what the other has to say and if we still feel we are correct, reason from the Scripture. If we were in error-again this can apply to theology or in the secular realm, we should be willing to be instructed to learn more.

And this is exactly what Apollos did. And think about his position in that we said he was likely very highly educated in theology and public speaking from his upbringing in Alexandria. He had actually been in the presence of John the Baptist, maybe even Jesus. The Bible describes his speaking as eloquent. He obviously had charisma and leadership qualities. He had just met Aquila and Priscilla. He could have very easily thought, “Don’t they know who I am? Don’t they know how formally educated I am? Don’t they know I was in the Holy Land with John the Baptist? Who are these two tentmakers trying to teach me something?” But that is not what he did. He listened to them and he even learned more. Why? Because they were teaching him from God’s perfect word. These three were one in the Lord.

Thus, we can learn a lot that we can apply to various situations in our lives from these three. And there are other avenues that could be explored in more detail, that will have to be saved for another sermon or study. We could examine more all three of these believers’ willingness to go wherever God sent them. We could focus on the hospitality that was shown by Aquila and Priscilla, which is something God’s people are supposed to show as taught in both the Old and New Testament. We are not given the details, but in Romans 16:4 St. Paul says they even put their lives on the line for him. With Valentine’s Day coming up, one could glean much from the loving partnership of marriage that was shared by Aquila and Priscilla.

Three for one today. Even better than sale at your favorite store. Because we heard today from the Word of God about three individuals that God used in a mighty way to advance the Kingdom of God in making disciples as we heard Jesus command at the end of St. Matthew. Three people, but united in one mission:

the Gospel. And we serve the One True and Triune God, and this one God is three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. These distinct persons of the Holy Trinity with different roles, but one mission of saving His fallen creation.

Amen.