

BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS: PRISCILLA

Part II of Best Supporting Actor/Actress

Acts 18: 24-27, Romans 16: 3-5a

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One day a Jew named Aquila, living in Pontus, migrated to Rome. He may have taken his wife Prisca with him, or he may have met her in Rome and married her there. That is not known. She also may have been Jewish, maybe not. That is not known. Together they may have converted to Christianity there, maybe elsewhere. That is not known.

What is known is that the Jewish community in Rome had become deeply divided over acceptance or non-acceptance of someone called Christ, and this division was causing quite a stir. Then, sometime around 49 or 50 AD, Emperor Claudius tired of the dispute that was causing unrest in his capital city, so he expelled all Jews from Rome. That expulsion included Aquila, at least, so he and Prisca left Rome and settled in Corinth. They were tentmakers, which means either that they were weavers of cloth, or actually made tents out of leather goods, or both. They set up their business in Corinth.

Their story is neither unusual nor compelling and would be of no interest to us, except that after they had settled in Corinth the apostle Paul arrived, and he became a co-worker of theirs in tent making, and they became co-workers of his in church planting. Here is the background.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy were busy in the Greek-speaking world trying to win disciples of Christ and to plant new churches. Their method was consistent. When going into a town, Paul would preach/teach/discuss in the local synagogue trying to convince fellow Jews that Jesus had risen from the dead and was the expected Messiah and Lord. Most often some signed up as believers. Those who did not would tell him to move on. He would then take his message to the Gentiles and win some converts among them. The new believers, both Jew and Gentile, would then meet together in what we would call a house church and continue to gain other believers. Paul would then move on, either by choice or because he was chased out of town by angry Jews or merchants, or government officials or some combination.

Most recently, Paul had been in Athens, where things did not go badly, but neither had they gone particularly well. The folks in that philosophical hotbed loved to debate religion and politics and philosophy, and they were thrilled to hear Paul and to debate with him and to question him. They enjoyed hearing about Jesus, but that was it. They worshipped many gods so even if they perceived Jesus to be a god, he just made one more. He was not someone to whom they were going to give their lives. Paul stated his case, but made no inroads. Then he moved on to Corinth.

In Corinth, job one was to get a job. This was necessary because, for much of his ministry, Paul was a bi-vocational evangelist. That is to say that he had a paying job during the day and was an evangelist by night. It had to be this way because, at this point, there was no church able to support him so that he could do ministry full time. He had to support himself. His vocation was tent making. Prisca and Aquila brought them into their business and also housed them, and they became lifelong friends.

By the way, Prisca is a formal name, a given name. The diminutive version of Prisca is Priscilla, like calling Deborah Debbie or Amanda Mandy. She is called by both names in the scripture.

Whether Priscilla and Aquila were believers before Paul got to Corinth is unclear. But if not, they became believers and they joined Paul in his work. So much so, that when Paul left Corinth some eighteen months later and went to Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila went with him. Paul stayed in Ephesus only briefly, long enough to preach in the local synagogue, then he left for Jerusalem. Priscilla and Aquila remained in Ephesus to host and to grow the new house church.

Now, you may have noticed that I keep mentioning Priscilla and Aquila together. This is because they are always mentioned together in scripture. There are hints that she was the more outspoken or dominant one, but only hints. At the very least, she acted as an equal partner with her husband. This is significant because it is often said that Paul, and the parts of the Bible that Paul wrote, are clear that women are to be subordinate to men, certainly in matters of faith, and certainly when it comes to teaching others, especially women teaching men. But in numerous places Paul wrote that in Christ there is no male or female, that we all have one faith, one baptism, one Lord. Add to this that actions speak louder than words. In action, Paul included women like Priscilla and Phoebe in key roles, such as the office of Deacon.

This is evident in the account of Apollos coming to Ephesus. Apollos was an eloquent, dynamic evangelist from Alexandria. Alexandria was the center of higher learning. It was the ivy league of intellectual centers. Apollos was bright and charismatic. Even his name is impressive, hinting of a Greek god. He was loved in Ephesus. For all of his knowledge and skill, however, he was limited theologically. We are told that he knew only the baptism of John, which is code to say that he knew that Jesus fulfilled John's prophecies but did not fully grasp the meaning of the death and resurrection of Christ or the work of the Holy Spirit. We read in Acts that Priscilla and Aquila took him aside and explained things to him more accurately. Imagine, one of the foremost evangelists of the time being schooled by a woman. She did not see herself, and others did not see her as subordinate. She was a respected teacher.

Some even speculate that Priscilla wrote the Book of Hebrews, the one New Testament book with no name attached, although the King James Version attributes it to Paul, which is unlikely. There is little evidence that Priscilla wrote it and chances are better that she did not. Just the fact that it has been thought possible that she did, however, and that

the idea still floats out there, is remarkable. One supporter of the theory believes that her name was omitted as the author was either to suppress its female authorship, or to protect the letter from suppression. That is not implausible.

That is not why she has won this year's best-supporting actress award, though. The reason is that Priscilla is the quintessential example of someone working behind the scenes who nevertheless plays a critical, foundational role. She was more than an assistant to Paul. He himself called her a fellow co-worker in Christ. She and her husband gave him a job in Corinth and gave him a place to live in Corinth and helped the church to sprout roots there. She and her husband went to Ephesus with him. Paul was the headliner, followed by Apollos, and later Timothy. But Paul and Apollos and Timothy came and went. Their role was to move about getting things started. Priscilla stayed and kept things going. The church in Ephesus and later back in Rome, met in her house. We can be sure that she led and taught just as she quietly instructed Apollos. Paul wrote to the church in Rome, "Greet Prisca and Aquila who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles." Paul, the premier evangelist, needed people who could nurture the new found churches, teach sound doctrine, keep people centered on Christ, and hold the believers together. Priscilla was one on whom he depended and one whom he trusted.

It makes me think about the circuit-riding days in the early history of Methodism. In our structure today, we assign pastors to each congregation, and we expect the pastors to be involved in all the day-to-day work of the church in addition to preaching and teaching. But in the early days, there were no pastors, just preachers. The preachers, called circuit riders, visited all of the churches on their assigned circuits on a rotating basis. There could be dozens of churches and far apart. Consequently, the circuit rider came through only every two or three months. When there, they would preach and perform weddings and baptisms and funerals, lead the Lord's Supper, have an administrative meeting called the quarterly conference, and then ride on to the next church.

The circuit riders had the role of Paul and Apollos and Timothy. In between the visits, though, the church had to carry on. Lay leaders were needed to hold the congregation together and to continue the growth of the believers and the body. Lay leaders like Priscilla.

A more modern parallel might be small group leaders. After all, it is in small groups in which most teaching, care, and support take place. It is in these groups that people can nurture one another. Priscilla probably never spoke in a public forum or to a very large group. A house church might have six or twelve or twenty people. The house church was small enough that people could eat together, pray together, share joys and concerns, and learn from each other. It is an informal setting, but even in that setting it takes someone strong in faith and versed in scripture and doctrine to lead and guide and teach. Someone like Priscilla.

Last week I spoke with you about Barnabas, the son of encouragement, and how he brought others along and accepted the challenges given to him, and stuck with those whom

others had given up on. I talked about how the body needs that spirit of encouragement in it. Every church needs a Barnabas or two or three or more.

Every church needs a Priscilla or two or three or more. Those who can mold and shape and hold people together. Those who will never be on the front part of the stage but without whom the show won't go on. Priscillas can mostly be seen working one on one with folks or tending small groups. Their power is not in numbers but in staying power. They are the ones who stick around in Ephesus while Paul goes to Jerusalem. They are the ones who set up the room, and cook the meal, and lead the lesson. They are the ones who go out to lunch with others to help them work through faith issues. They are the ones willing to pray at meetings or to lead the devotions in their groups. They are the ones on whom every preacher and every church body depends. Paul may come around occasionally. Priscilla is there day in and day out.

Maybe you are a Priscilla. Maybe you can be. If her role is not exactly your role then ask, how can you be the best supporting actress you can be? Kudos to this year's winner of the New Testament Characters' Best Supporting Actress Award: Priscilla.

Amen.