

## Faithful Servants

When we say the word “apostle” in church, I would guess that the first thing that comes into everybody’s minds is that group of twelve men that were the inner circle of those who followed Jesus during his earthly ministry. But the word actually has a much broader meaning, even if it is rarely used in English. The Greek word, *αποστολος*, literally means “one who is sent off.” It can be translated as “messenger” or “ambassador” or “emissary,” that last word being quite familiar to fans of TV’s “Star Trek: Deep Space Nine.” When I was growing up in churches that were members of the Southern Baptist Convention, those who attended the national gathering of the convention were known, not as delegates, but as messengers, though I doubt that any of them would have claimed the title “apostle.”

But even in the Bible, the word “apostle” is not confined to the Twelve -- or the thirteen if you count Matthias, who was appointed to replace Judas Iscariot as one of the Twelve and never heard from again. In fact, if you sit down and read “The Acts of the Apostles,” Luke’s “sequel” to the Gospel that bears his name, you will quickly discover that he’s writing about a large cast of characters that actually only includes a few of the Twelve and those not for long. As a group, the Twelve disappear after chapter two. There are a couple of stories about Peter and John working together and we hear of the execution of John’s brother, James, in chapter 12, which you may remember from my sermon a couple of weeks ago on “Herod & Peter.” Even Peter, the undisputed leader of the Twelve, fades from the scene as Luke introduces Barnabas, the first deacons, including Stephen and Philip, and then Saul, later known as Paul. Jesus’ brother, James, rises to prominence as the leader of the Jerusalem church, but after the great Jerusalem Council, about which I spoke last week, even James and Peter disappear, to be replaced by Paul and his circle. Chapters 13-28 of “The Acts of the Apostles” are driven by Paul and company. Luke’s use of the term “apostle” is clearly broader than we might expect.

I mention all of this because I’d say that several of the people mentioned in our passage for this morning, as well as the chap depicted on the front of your bulletin, are worthy of the title “apostle.” They were messengers of the Good News of Jesus, “sent off” by the Holy Spirit. They were, as the title of this sermon implies, faithful servants of God. And, if these, what of others? What, in fact, of you and me?

Let’s start with the apostle in this story best known to us: Saul of Tarsus, known to Greek speakers, and subsequently to the Church in general, as Paul. We first meet him, of course, as an enemy of the Church. But after his dramatic conversion on the Damascus Road, and stays in Damascus, Jerusalem, back home in Tarsus, and then Antioch, Paul is commissioned by the Jerusalem Church to go out as an assistant to Barnabas on what we generally call his missionary journeys. After many adventures, not all of them pleasant, the two men reported back to Jerusalem, which led to the Council we heard about last week. When Paul hits the road again, it’s with Silas and Timothy as his assistants. Again, these early Christian missionaries see great success in spreading the Good News but also suffer for their faith along the way. Let’s hear about it in Paul’s own words, written in what we know as his Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter eleven: “Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman—I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from

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my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.”

That familiar passage was probably written near the end of his missionary travels, but even at the time of our passage, he's in trouble. As we pick up the story, he's been in Corinth for some eighteen months, and is having good results working alongside a fellow named Aquila and his wife, Priscilla, Silas, and Timothy. As was quite often the case on Paul's travels, he started his ministry by preaching to his fellow Jews in that place and there were those who responded positively. But, just as Paul had at first fought against the Church, some of the Jews to whom he spoke responded negatively and even violently. In this instance, it is poor Sosthenes who pays the price for allowing Paul to speak in the synagogue but Paul himself escapes harm and continues his ministry in Corinth “for a considerable time.” Eventually, he returns to Jerusalem and then his adopted home of Antioch, via Cenchreae, Ephesus, and Caesarea, before he sets out yet again.

Clearly, Paul has earned the title of “apostle,” a title which he defends vociferously in some of his letters. Clearly, given the terrible treatment he often received, his persistence in being a messenger of the Good News also earns him the title “faithful servant.” But there are others mentioned in this passage who merit our attention.

It is in verses 2 and 3 of chapter 18, which I did not read, that we first hear of two of them. I'll read verses 1-3: “After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together—by trade they were tentmakers.” Let's unwind this a little bit. Pontus, in case you were wondering, was at one time an independent kingdom but at the time of Acts was, of course, part of the Roman Empire. It's along the south coast of the Black Sea, in what is now northeast Turkey. As has often been the case in history, Aquila and Priscilla, whose families would have originated in the Promised Land, had moved from Pontus to Rome, probably for better business opportunities. But at some point around AD 50, Emperor Claudius had expelled the Jews from Rome. According to the Roman historian Suetonius, it was because “the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus.” J. Bradley Chance writes, “Chrestus was a rather common Latin name and was pronounced like the Greek word Christos.” So, most historians believe that Suetonius meant not Chrestus but Christos – the problem was the always turbulent relations between Jews who accepted Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, and those who did not. So, like Paul, Priscilla and Aquila had already suffered for their faith and they proved themselves faithful servants.

You may have noticed that although Acts 18:2 refers to “Aquila and Priscilla,” I just said, “Priscilla and Aquila.” Why? If you follow the references to this married couple through Acts and in the letters of Paul in which they are mentioned, the reference, except for their introduction and one other, always has Priscilla first. In Acts, we also see this in references to Barnabas and Paul. Paul, remember, was the junior member of the team at first. But once Paul rises to become the leader of the missionary team, Luke switches from “Barnabas and Paul” to “Paul and

Barnabas” or, later, “Paul and Silas.” The dominant team member is given first mention. Priscilla is clearly the dominant one in the couple, at least as far as their teaching ministry is concerned. Those who think Paul is unrelentingly anti-woman have conveniently ignored this as well as the prominent mention of the couple in Paul’s letter to the Romans, First Corinthians, and Second Timothy. There are some New Testament scholars who believe that it was Priscilla who wrote the anonymous Epistle to the Hebrews and that the epistle is anonymous because the male church hierarchy suppressed her name.

In this story, though, the primary contribution of Priscilla and Aquila was their mentorship of Apollos. Apollos, we hear from Luke, was “a Jew... a native of Alexandria... an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures.” At that time, the city of Alexandria in Northern Egypt, founded by Alexander the Great, was still an important center of learning. To say that Apollos was from Alexandria was almost to guarantee that he had a first-rate education, which at that time would have included elocution and rhetoric. He must have been a powerful speaker. Luke tells us “He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John.” Hearing this deficit in his theological training, Priscilla and Aquila took him under their wings. With their tutelage, he became an evangelist *par excellence*.

The church in Ephesus commissioned him to go to Corinth in place of Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila, to preach there. So successful was he, that Paul later had to chastise the members of the church in Corinth for dividing up by citing the evangelist who had won them to Christ. It’s recorded in First Corinthians, in chapters 1 and 3: “For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ... For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.” Like Paul, Apollos was a servant of God and a faithful servant.

In Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals, the authors pair today’s scripture with another hero of the church, a faithful servant, and an apostle. Benedict of Nursia is depicted on your bulletin. It’s a little surprising that they would choose Benedict as today’s example because, unlike many of the saints they cite, today is actually the official feast of St. Benedict. Benedict was born on or about March 2, 480, in Nursia, about 100 miles northeast of Rome, and died on or about March 21, 547. As a young man, he moved to Rome but, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* tells us, was “Shocked by the licentiousness” he found there. He returned to the countryside, eventually becoming a hermit, living in a cave near Subiaco. During his three years there, he was supplied with food and clothes by a monk named Romanus, from one of the nearby monasteries. So impressed were the nearby monks with Benedict’s learning and holiness, that when their abbot died, they invited the young Benedict to take over.

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Benedict, not impressed with the monks, had to be persuaded but did at last accept their invitation. Things did not go well. The monks were so enraged at Benedict's attempts to reform their lax lifestyle that they attempted to poison him. According to legend, a raven swooped down and snatched the poisoned bread from Benedict's hand, which is why he is often portrayed with a raven on his shoulder. Leaving the vicinity, Benedict founded the great monastery of Monte Cassino, which continues to this day, though much diminished from its former glory.

But miracles and the founding of monasteries aside, Benedict's greatest gift to the Christian world was the "Rule of Benedict," a book on the proper conduct of monks and laity and guidelines for the successful administration of a monastery. The Rule of Benedict was and is considered a model of balance, moderation, and reasonableness. It is still the most followed set of guidelines in Christian monasticism. In fact, Benedict is sometimes called the Father of Western Christian monasticism. Unlike some other, harsher religious orders, Benedict clearly had both the spiritual and the physical well-being of his followers in mind. *Encyclopedia Britannica* reports: "His monks are allowed clothes suited to the climate, sufficient food (with no specified fasting apart from the times observed by the Roman church), and sufficient sleep (7 1/2–8 hours). The working day is divided into three roughly equal portions: five to six hours of liturgical and other prayer; five hours of manual work, whether domestic work, craft work, garden work, or fieldwork; and four hours reading of the Scriptures and spiritual writings. This balance of prayer, work, and study is another of Benedict's legacies." The Latin phrase he coined, *Ora et Labora* - pray and work, guides both the order and many Christians outside it to this day.

As with the others I've mentioned this morning, the impact of Benedict's faithful servanthood cannot be overstated. The Benedictine order was the spiritual home of 11 popes and of the following major figures in Christian history among many others: Augustine of Canterbury (the first Archbishop of Canterbury, often called "Apostle to the English"), St. Bernard of Clairvaux (the founder of the Cistercian Order of monks), St. Berno of Cluny (the founder of the hugely influential monastery at Cluny), the Venerable Bede (the Father of English History), Anselm of Canterbury (the theological hero of substitutionary atonement, which has dominated Western Christianity), Abbot Suger (credited with popularizing Gothic architecture), Hildegard of Bingen (the German Benedictine abbess, writer, composer, philosopher, mystic, visionary, and polymath of the High Middle Ages, whose work has only recently come to be appreciated), Joan Chittester (the American Benedictine nun, theologian, author, and speaker), and Thomas Merton, whose Trappist order is a subset of the Cistercians, which was founded, as mentioned, by Bernard of Clairvaux. The list goes on and on.

Saul of Tarsus was a rising young Pharisee who zealously persecuted the followers of Jesus until he became one himself. He worked to bring people to faith in God through Christ Jesus, traveling incessantly and writing letters to the friends he'd either left behind or not yet met. He had no idea he was writing what would become holy scripture for Christians. To him, the Scriptures were the Tanakh: The Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Priscilla and Aquila were artisans, hoping to make a decent living in Rome with their leather work until they got swept up in the "disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus." They'd no idea they'd end up as the tutors of one of the greatest preachers in Christian history nor that (possibly) Priscilla, like Paul, would

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contribute to the new Christian scriptures. Benedict just wanted to be left alone to pray and glorify God.

But all of these and so many more who are just names in the book of Acts or not even that, were faithful servants of God. They may not have known where the journey would take them, but they were willing to follow Jesus and to give God the glory. They probably had no idea how they had influenced people who would influence people who would influence people. And what about us, Good Shepherd? Are we willing to follow the path of the cross wherever it may take us? We rarely know how our words and actions impact those around us. A chance and casual conversation for us may be the turning point in someone else's life. But if we are faithful, if we follow our hearts as they are in tune with the Holy Spirit, amazing things will happen. And, perhaps best of all, we, like our dear friends Jean Kim and Frank Lowe who've departed this life in the last fortnight, can look forward to arriving at our final destination and hearing those beautiful words, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" May it be so for all of us. Thanks be to God. Amen.