

## Opening Someone Else's Mail

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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4/28 Acts 18:1-4

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. <sup>2</sup>There he found a Jew named Aquila from 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, <sup>3</sup>and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together—by trade they were tentmakers. <sup>4</sup>Every Sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks.

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

**10** Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you but that you be knit together in the same mind and the same purpose. **11** For it has been made clear to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. **12** 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." **13** Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? **14** I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, **15** so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. **16** I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else. **17** For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel—and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

**18** For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

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Chloe sent Paul a letter with concerns about her house church community, and Paul wrote back.

Everytime we open the Bible to 1st Corinthians, we are opening someone else's mail. While we may not open our downstairs neighbors' credit card bill, when it comes to ancient history, of course, reading other people's letters is valid. Ancient letters are considered primary source documents. But when we read these Biblical letters, we've got to keep some important points in mind. Most importantly, we only have one side of the conversation. For whatever reason, Chloe's letters to Paul did not survive. Not only that, but we don't have all of Paul's letters to the Christian church in Corinth - in 1st Corinthians, Paul mentions his previous letter. Which we don't have. And on top of that, Paul probably did not think he was writing scripture or theology. He was just writing to Chloe and her people about specific events and conflicts that had come up in Corinth since Paul converted the first people to Jesus' way in the fifth decade of the first century. Later Christians made this part of our Bible.

But, as I said last week, Acts and Paul's letters are the closest we get to early church history. Reading other people's mail is the only way for us to connect with our ancestors in faith from the decades after Easter. We are not going to write *return to sender* on this envelope. Instead we'll try to do two things, briefly, this morning. The first is to find out more about some of these folks mentioned in 1 Corinthians, more about the city, more about the context.

And the second thing we'll do is to learn from the very first wisdom Paul offers in this particular letter - wisdom for how to deal with divisions in the church.

"It has been made clear to me by Chloe's people..." Chloe, head of a household of Christians and leader in the church in Corinth, sent a letter to Paul.

While in Corinth - a wild ancient city - Paul helped to establish multiple house churches that occasionally met together in a large assembly.

But after he left, there was trouble. Factions developed. People argued. People aligned themselves with different leaders - Paul, Peter, Apollos. This was of course a completely unique situation in the history of religion. No community before or since has ever experienced internal division and struggle. Not a one. No one here can relate to this.

Can I just testify, for a moment, how deeply grateful I am, every day I wake up knowing that Pilgrim in 2024 is not a divided congregation? I mean, can I get an amen on that?

And still, every community needs to remember the message Paul sent to Corinth.

The invitation and the work - for Corinth, and to those of us reading their mail two thousand years later - is to not let factions and divisions get in the way of faith. And not to let factions and divisions get in the way of faithful living. A lot of Paul's letters are to communities dealing with division. He tries to re-center them on Christ. The good news of the Cross - which more broadly means the good news of Jesus' birth and life and death and resurrection - are profoundly and radically different from anything else the world knows. The world calls them foolish to follow a messiah that was crucified - but followers of the risen Christ find the power of God in the Christ event. Paul is saying, it's not about me - or Apollos or Peter - or any

of the other gods worshipped in Corinth. It's about Christ. So Paul calls for an end to division, quarrels, and fights.

He says it this way in a letter to the church in Ephesus - also a church dealing with conflict:

“I...beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, **2** with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, **3** making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace: **4** there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, **5** one Lord, one faith, one baptism, **6** one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”  
(Ephesians 4)

Now, Paul calls for unity but there's something subtle here - unity does not mean uniformity. Churches are full of folks who look different, speak differently, vote differently....bound up in a covenant of love. Not a mega-identity or tribalism<sup>1</sup>, but community that is life-giving, world-healing. I was reminded of that by a student in my polity class. I asked Joy Castro-Wehr's permission to quote her:

“...When I first learned about the United Church of Christ, I questioned how a church that valued autonomy so highly could remain interconnected with itself and find the theological harmony necessary to stand strong and unified in the world....I see the unity of the United Church of Christ expressed on a profound scale in local churches' trust in the power of a covenant built simply on the foundation of expressing God's loving presence in our world. I see profound unity in the shared belief that there is a miraculously holy and loving dimension to this human existence, and that the life of Jesus Christ is our example for what is possible through this revelation...Crucially, I believe that there is great power and strength in the United Church of Christ's belief that local communities are able to decide how this revelation of God's presence in the world will be

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Smietana discusses the concept of mega-identities in his book *Reorganized Religion*, ps. 126

communicated...this mosaic of theological expression is not incidental, but foundational to the denomination.”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, we don't have to be uniform in our practice or belief. We can center on Christ and live with one another in harmony and love, serving God and following Jesus in the world in a “mosaic of theological expression.” That's something for us to continually strive for. May it be so.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Joy Castro-Wehr, Final Paper for UCC Polity, History and Theology at Harvard Divinity School, Spring 2024.

For timing, I chose not to include this portion in the spoken sermon today:

Who's Chloe again?

Now, most of us know that there's some messy stuff later in this letter, in regard to gender roles. I am convinced by scholar Bernadette Brooten that we should "bring [actual historic] women to the center, instead of concentrating primarily on male attitudes toward women...the focus should shift to reconstructing the lives of women" from these communities.<sup>3</sup>

Scholars have come to believe that Chloe was a Gentile woman, the head of a household in Corinth, a woman of means and authority, a leader in the Corinthian church. She knew Paul well enough to send emissaries to him to ask his counsel about conflicts among the followers.

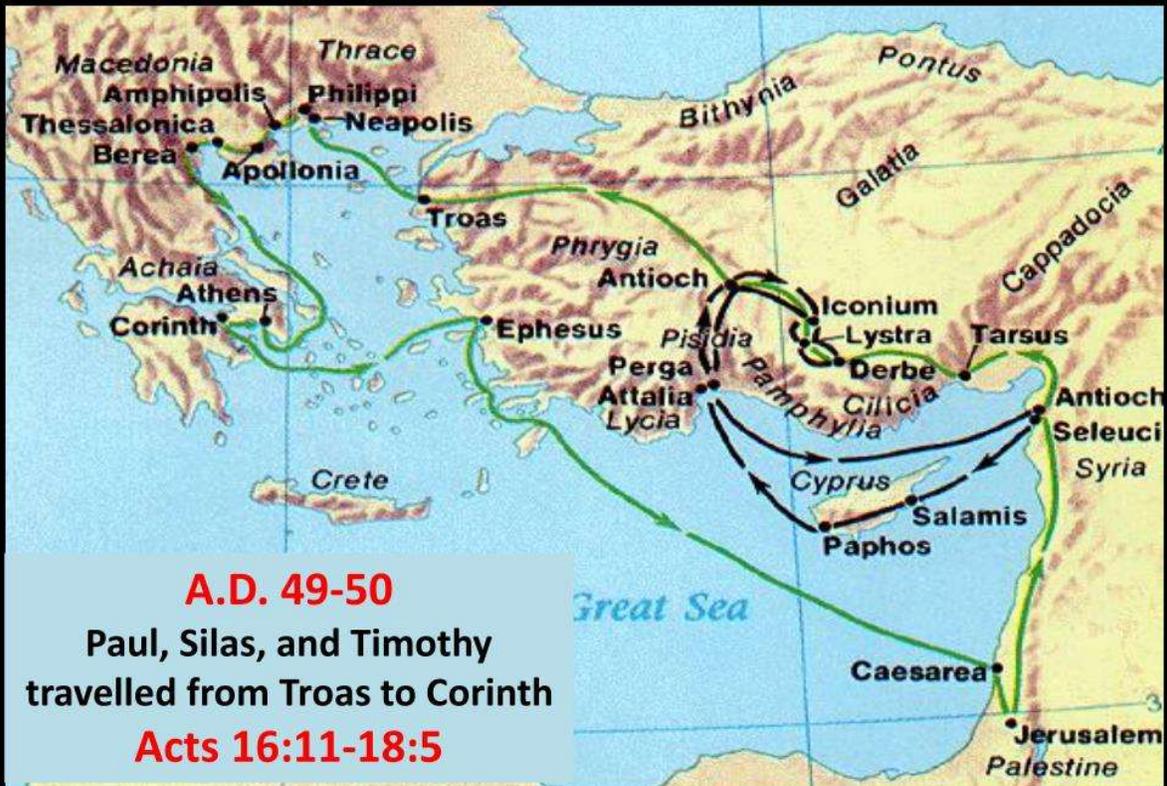
Priscilla gives us another example of a woman in leadership. She and her husband Aquila, who were examples of early Jewish Christians, on that bridge between faiths we talked about last week, are mentioned in Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians and 2 Timothy. Paul calls them his co-workers, and they both travel with him to various early Christian communities.

But while we are noticing things, let's not jump past the fact that Priscilla and Aquila had to leave Rome due to an expulsion of Jews in 49 of the Common Era - something documented in multiple historic records. We know that Jews have faced persecution for millennia.

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<sup>3</sup> Brooten's point is summarized in turn by Margaret Y. MacDonald in *Women and Christian Origins*, page 198.

# Thessalonica



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