

**Honest to God**

**Acts 4:32-5:11**

**First Presbyterian Church**

**October 27, 2019**

**Prayer for Illumination**

God our helper,  
by your Holy Spirit, open our minds,  
that as the Scriptures are read  
and your Word is proclaimed,  
we may be led into your truth  
and taught your will,  
for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Acts 4:32-5:11**

32Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. 33With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. 35They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

36There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). 37He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

5But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; 2with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. 3"Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? 4While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!" 5Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. 6The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him. 7After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price." And she said, "Yes, that was the price." 9Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." 10Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

## Sermon

Did you know that preachers  
are sometimes prone to exaggeration?  
Shocking, I know... but it's true.

And perhaps that's why  
we are not terribly surprised to hear Luke claim  
that "the company of those who believed  
were of one heart and soul."

How nice... how sweet... and perhaps, how unrealistic!

But when Luke claims that  
"no one said that any of the things he possessed was his own,  
but that they had everything in common,"  
our ears perk up and we wonder - how can this be?

Maybe folks can worship together  
and study the Bible together  
and even agree on a long-range plan together...  
but to not claim ownership of anything they own  
and to freely share whatever they have with others?

How can this be?

Well, this can be for one reason and one reason only:  
because of the power of the Holy Spirit...  
which had been poured out on the church  
just two chapters earlier in the Book of Acts.

Because of this Spirit – this powerful Spirit -  
the company of those who believed  
were not only of one heart and soul,  
but everything they owned was held in common...  
and there was not a needy person among them,  
for as many as owned land or houses sold them  
and brought the proceeds and laid it at the apostles' feet  
to be distributed to each as any had need.

This is an early picture of the church taking care of its own...  
the church in which those who have more  
offer it so that those who are poor have what they need.

This IS a community that is creating in its life together  
a witness to the kind of world God intends for all.

Just look at Joseph (sometimes called Barnabas) as Exhibit A:  
he sold a field and brought the money  
and laid it at the disciples' feet...  
an example of how the power which broke the bonds of death on Easter,  
and then was let loose on the church at Pentecost,  
has now empowered these believers  
to release their grip on private property  
for the good of the entire community.

Well, not EVERY believer.

And thus, we have today's story.

Folks were bringing their offerings to First Church Jerusalem...

and by that I truly mean the FIRST church.

Apparently, this little Christian community had taken Jesus at his word –

he said they should love one another as he loved them...

and they devised a system to do just that:

sharing resources – each contributing whatever she had –

and each receiving whatever he needed for self or family.

It's a fine system that can work very well

in groups with a high level of trust...

and that was the way it WAS

in this little, fledgling community in Jerusalem.

Until it WASN'T.

I think we often assume

that the earliest Christians were all poor – not true!

Some owned real estate... others ran successful businesses...

there were those who had significant means.

Among this group was a couple in the church

– Ananias and Sapphira –

who, like Joseph, sold some real estate

and brought a generous portion of the proceeds

as an offering to the church.

The problem was that Ananias (with his wife's blessing)

SAID it was the entire amount.

Now, Peter may have been impulsive, but he was no dummy –

he knew how much real estate

in that part of Jerusalem was worth:

"Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit

and keep back part of the proceeds of the land?

How is it that you have contrived this deep in your heart?"

Then, after saying this, the most astonishing thing happened –

Ananias dropped dead!

Right there in front of the whole congregation - dead.

Once they collected themselves,

some of the younger men carried Ananias out feet first

and buried him.

Strange goings on to be sure – but the story gets stranger yet.

A few hours later, his wife Sapphira came by the church

not knowing what had happened to her husband.

We don't know why she was there –

maybe to get music organized for choir practice...

or to get her Sunday school room set up...

or maybe just to bask a little in the praise

she was due for their recent gift.  
But when Peter saw her, he asked her about the sale price for the land  
and when she told him what it was  
he knew instantly that she was in on the deception.

Pretending to be mystified, Peter asked:  
“How is it that you could put the Spirit of the Lord to the test?  
Look, the feet of those who have just buried your husband  
are at the door, and they will carry you out.”  
And sure enough, with that she also fell down dead.  
The same young men then carried HER out  
to be buried beside her husband.  
And with remarkable understatement,  
Luke tells us that “great fear” seized the whole church.

Now, Samuel Johnson once pointed out  
that the prospect of imminent death (execution)  
has the wonderful effect of concentrating the mind.

Well, if that is so...  
then I may have found THE PERFECT BIBLE STORY  
for church budget time.

I mean, if Ananias and Sapphira were “zapped” by God  
for holding back on the church,  
the same might happen to me and you, right?

And if that’s true –  
if you seriously thought God would ZAP you  
for a pledge that was too small –

I suspect the only financial problem we would have around here  
is figuring out how to spend all the money you gave.

Regretfully, (at least as far as the church budget is concerned)  
Luke doesn’t say that God zapped Ananias and Sapphira.

No, he merely reports that, without explanation,  
they suddenly died.

And that fits with our life experience... not to mention our theology.  
We know good and well that God doesn’t zap folks  
according to the size of their contribution...  
or anything else for that matter.

If he did, we would definitely be a much smaller congregation  
this morning.

Yet, if God refuses to ZAP people  
on account of their holding back,  
it’s not because God doesn’t care.  
It’s only because God doesn’t need to.  
God is still judging us for holding back...

it's just that sometimes God judges us  
by simply getting out of the way  
and letting us judge ourselves...  
by getting out of the way and letting us die ourselves.

Friends, let me give you some good news...  
and then some bad news that hopefully leads to good news.  
The good news is that you can be sure...  
that if, on November 10<sup>th</sup> you fail to contribute generously,  
you won't be carried out of worship feet first.

But you can also be sure (and here's the bad news)  
that according to Jesus  
the love of money and what it does to us  
is serious business... is a matter of life and death.  
And if we fail to respond to God's grace to us by the way we live...  
if we assert the primacy of our own "wants"  
above the "needs" of others...  
if we do not respond to God's generosity  
with some real generosity of our own...  
that is, if we hold back...  
then something in us dies,  
just as surely as if our heart stopped beating.

A man attends worship regularly...  
he hears God's gracious promises proclaimed every week...  
joins in singing praises to God for great mercies...  
offers words of thanksgiving for all God has given him.

But when the offering is received  
he puts in a mere token...  
less than he'll spend on a nice meal out later that week ...  
and ZAP! Something in him dies.

She's asked by the children's minister  
to help out with Vacation Bible School –  
"I've already done my work here" she responds...  
"it's time for the younger people to take over" ZAP!

"I don't like the hymns they pick...  
and I sure can't do that "praise and worship" music...  
so I just don't sing... ZAP!"

"There are uncertain times...  
and eventually I've got to put two kids through college.  
I would like to more, but for a while,  
charity will begin at home." ZAP

I worked hard for this and I deserve to enjoy it!" ZAP!  
"Didn't Jesus himself say that the poor will always be with us?" ZAP!

Let me say again –

I don't for a moment think the story of Ananias and Sapphira  
is about raising funds for the church.

What it IS ABOUT is how our holding back...

whether it is money or time or talent  
or our singing voice or forgiveness or love -  
how our holding back cuts us off  
from the community that the living Christ  
makes possible by his Spirit in us.

Jesus says that where your treasure is,

there will your hearts be also...  
so when you're able to give something and don't,  
it's a sure signal that you're not all in.

Not that you're a bad person...

not that God's gonna zap you and we're gonna have to call  
the good folks at Bass-Smith to come carry you out.

No, it's just a signal that you're not yet all in

when it comes to this vision of a community  
that the Spirit of the Risen Christ makes possible.

The church is intended to be an alternative community –

a sign – a signal to the world  
that Christ makes possible a way of life  
that is unlike ANYTHING the world has seen before...  
and that a huge part of what the world has not seen before  
is how incredibly generous these Christians could be  
with their resources.<sup>1</sup>

Now, there is another story –

probably a bit more familiar than this one –  
we came across it Friday morning in Bible study.

A wealthy man comes to Jesus and asks:

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus responds, “You know the commandments –

no adultery, no murder, no stealing,  
no false witness, honor your father and mother.”

And the man is quick to say

he has kept all those since he was a boy.

Then, Jesus says, “Well... there is this one commandment  
you have not kept.

It's the first one... the most important one...  
you shall have no other gods before me.

So go... sell all you own... distribute the money to the poor...

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<sup>1</sup> Fred C. Craddock in his commentary on Acts in the Interpretation Series (WJK,1988), p.54

and come follow me.”

Now, does that sound familiar?

Go sell what you own and distribute the money to the poor?

And that's when it happens – the ZAP, I mean –

it's not as dramatic as what happened to Ananias and Sapphira,

but that's when something deep inside this man

dies a little death.

And to use Luke's words,

he leaves Jesus a very, very sad man.

I think about this guy... actually, I think about him a lot.

And I wonder, “What was his sadness ABOUT?”

We've been taught it's about his refusal to part with his possessions...

that he loves money and his stuff MORE than he loves God...

and that his sadness about this whole matter

means that he is rejecting Jesus' way to eternal life.

But what if we're wrong about that?

What if he does willingly sell all he owns and gives it to the poor?

What if he did eventually return to follow Jesus?

What if the rich man goes away sad,

NOT to return to his life of wealth and luxury,

but precisely because, in the presence of Jesus,

he has chosen God over mammon...

what if he finally “gets” the true cost of following God,

and he is going to do exactly what Jesus

has called him to do?

Yet, right then – in that moment –

before he comes to know the joy of sharing...

when all he has is a PROMISE of eternal life...

right then it feels like he is losing everything.

Who wouldn't be sad?

Which is precisely what Jesus acknowledged just moments later,

“How hard it is for those who have wealth

to enter the kingdom of God.”

Friends, Jesus KNOWS this is hard...

it's why he talked so much about money and possessions –

he KNOWS what they MEAN to us...

he knows what they DO to us...

he knows this is hard!

But he also knows it is NOT impossible.

This is not something we can do ALONE...

it is vital (absolutely vital) that we stay connected

to others who value giving and sharing...

stay connected to the kind of community

that supports those who have need.

And as Jesus said to his disciples –

it is vital that we remember

what his Spirit made possible

in that earliest of Christian communities.

It was nothing short of miraculous! Truly miraculous!

Jesus intended for his followers to be an alternative community –

a sign – a signal to the world that he has made possible

a way of life together that was, and still is,

unlike ANYTHING the world has seen before.

And a huge part of what the world has not seen before

is how incredibly generous these Christians can be.