

Zapped Acts 4:32-5:11

For good reason,

not everything in scripture
is what we would describe
as preach-able.

There are some passages
that don't ever end up in the lectionary.

Stories like the one in 2 Kings
when the prophet Elisha,
(you remember, he becomes the next prophet
after Elijah is whisked away into heaven in a chariot)

well the story in 2 Kings goes like this:
a group of boys—the text says small boys—is taunting Elisha.

They are chanting,

“Go away baldhead! go away baldhead!”

He turns around, curses them in the name of the Lord
and two she-bears come out of the woods
and maul 42 of the boys.

The story concludes,
not with repentance
or prayers said for the boys' burial
but with Elisha
basically turning on his heel and going home.

So yeah,
not preaching that story.

Perhaps equally horrific,

might be to preach a story,
on the last Sunday
of stewardship season at your church,
about two people
who withhold some of their cash from the church
and drop dead.

Zapped, just like that.

Yeah, not preaching that story...

Oh wait...

Here we are with a rather uncomfortable text
...on the day our topic is the stewardship of money.
Aren't you glad
we haven't passed the offering plates yet?
PTL, praise the Lord—there's still time!
I mean we're all fine and good
with the first part of this story,
where everyone in the early church
is getting along and sharing all their worldly goods;
it is Hallmark movie in the making
—*they were all of one heart and soul*—
you are almost waiting
for the other shoe to drop;
for it to become a Lifetime movie.
Well, it will.

The backdrop for our scripture
comes from the very first chapter Acts
when before Jesus ascends into heaven
he gives the disciples, now apostles
their final charge,
“But you will receive power
when the Holy Spirit has come up on you
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,
in all Judea, and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth.”

This is the mission of the church,
to go out and be witnesses to all of the nations.

With those words ringing in their ears,
Luke's second installment to his gospel,
tells the story of the many
Acts of the Apostles.
In these first few chapters
lots of things are happening
—miraculous healings,
numerous conversions;
transformative preaching

...all of this of course
is rooted in the power of the Holy Spirit
that fills early church.
And perhaps the promise
of the Spirit's indwelling in this new church
is namely the way
they care for one another.¹

This community was different;
this is kind of caring for one another
that meant there was not a needy person among them.
Being of one heart and one soul
—my family can't even accomplish that
to decide if we are eating at El Paso or Village Inn
on a Friday night!

Luke uses that term, of one heart and soul
knowing it has familiarity
with the Greek images of solidarity
—which show virtues of communities
that are grounded in friendships
that prize what is best for all
over what is best for self.²
While it does sound idyllic and almost too good to be true,
this kind of sharing and depending on one another
works well in communities
where there is a high level of trust,
like monastic orders.³

But this wasn't communal living
like the Big Brother TV show.
They weren't all necessarily
living together in one big house
where the cameras are rolling
and someone is always crying
and the rules dictate

¹ Samuel E. Ballentine, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 2 Acts 4:32-35* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2008 pg. 385)

² *Ibid*, pg. 385

³ Rev. Dr. Whit Malone, *Stewardship Sermon*, Springdale Presbyterian Church 1995

that everything they have
right down to the Oreos
is to be shared among the house.
Rather Luke's report of this community
having everything in common
is a mark of this new church,
and points more to a generosity of hearts and minds;
of lifestyles where
when a need arose within the community,
the community rose to the occasion
with a generous sharing of their resources.⁴

Inspired by this sharing of resources,
followers of Jesus and new converts
of the apostles preaching and teaching,
gave themselves fully to this new movement.
They were filled with the Spirit
to take care of each other
in what seemed like radical ways,
which meant they gave a lot of what they had
to make this community work.

You know, in the fundraising world
when you give the most,
you are likely to get your name
mentioned or on the front of the program.
*Tonight's gala is sponsored by our Gold Level donors
or this ground breaking is possible because of our Champion Circle.*
Or maybe you get your name on the building.

In the church, however,
our giving is largely done in private.
Matthew's Jesus says,
"So whenever you give alms
do not sound a trumpet
as the hypocrites in the synagogues
and in the streets,
so that they may be praised by others

⁴ Samuel E. Ballentine, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 2 Acts 4:32-35* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2008 pg. 387)

...But when you give alms
don't let your left hand know
what your right hand is doing."

Jesus says give in secret.

This is why we always give you a Stewardship *packet*;
we Presbys want you to privately
consider that pledge and seal it up!

And I think this was the case
with the early church too.

There's no need to sound the gong
when that last caller
puts the total over the top
and gets the free Rick Steve's Europe DVD set.

Because the whole group
of those who believed
were of one heart and soul.

No need to mention the names of donors

...unless your name is Joseph.

Unless your name is Joseph
and you are Levite, native to Cyprus.

Your giving isn't worth making a big deal
because everyone is contributing,
unless your name is Joseph
unless your nickname is now Barnabas
—which son of encouragement—
because you've sold a field of yours
and given over all the profits to the early church.

If that is the case,
then we will send out an FPC connect email
and let everyone know about your generosity!

Was ole Barnabas an over achiever?

There's a lady in my workout group
—she goes above and beyond,
works hard every time, pushes herself,
makes things a challenge,
and we who are lazier

will say, *she's so extra*.
Was Barnabas, extra?

Actually, I think Barnabas
must have been rather affluent.
We know he sold a field that belonged to him.
Your wealth wasn't in a savings account
with Wells Fargo back then.
Because land ownership was how your accrued wealth,
so this was no small thing
to sell a field you had
—you know just some land lying around—
and then you give all the profit to the church!
This generosity was monumental enough
that Luke makes sure to report it.

Ananias and Sapphira were wealthy too.
They sold some of their real estate in Jerusalem
at also brought it to the church.

But when they brought their offering,
well... Peter knew how much real estate was going for
and forgetting his seminary class
on pastoral sensitivity,
where he would have asked
Ananias and Sapphira to come
to his office one afternoon for coffee;
forgetting his filter completely,
Peter confronts them right then and there
in front of the whole church.⁵

Can you imagine?
They were probably both redder
than the shade of this carpet!

“Ananias,’ Peter asked,
‘why has Satan filled your heart
to lie to the Holy Spirit
and to keep back part of the proceeds

⁵ Rev. Dr. Whit Malone, Stewardship Sermon, Springdale Presbyterian Church 1995

of the land?
While 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!”

And holy moly,
I wouldn't believe this story
if it weren't right here in front of us,
but when Ananias heard these words,
he dropped dead.
Zapped!
Right then, right there!

When everyone got over the initial shock,
some of the young men,
from the Young Men's Bible study,
wrap up his body and take him outside to bury him.
Talk about the ratings
that would have spiked on Big Brother!
Everyone would be glued to the TV
to see what was going to happen next.
Of course what happens next
is just as disturbing.

Three hours later Sapphira shows up
wondering why Ananias hasn't answered her texts
but not worrying too much,
goes ahead to church.
Peter, maybe wondering
if they had planned this together or not,
asks Sapphira to tell him
whether or not she and her husband
sold their property for a certain price.
I don't know if she panicked or not,
but with a straight face
—*because it had been rehearsed*—

she lies to Peter and everyone about the price,
knowing they had held some money back.
Dumbfounded Peter says,
“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.”

Zap.

The young men come from off camera
and carry her out to bury her next to her husband.
No one in the Big Brother house can believe it!
Great fear seized the whole church
is what Luke reports.
I can't say I blame them.
It was that fearful kind of awe.

Death tends to focus us;
holding out attention,
helping us laser in on our priorities.
If that is true,
this is the perfect story and time
to talk about giving money to the church.

Especially if, for instance,
anyone here has even the slightest inclination
that by holding back from church stewardship
you might get zapped!

Imagine the money we would have
if we really thought
that by giving too little to the church,
God would “zap” you,
right then and right there.
That would be the stewardship campaign
to end all stewardship campaigns!

I wonder if Meaghan and the stewardship team
can make a clean looking,
leaf and lightning logo for our next campaign,
Zapped?

Of course, it needs to be pointed out
that Luke doesn't ever say
that God zapped Ananias or Sapphira.
The story merely goes,
that without explanation they died on the spot.
And thanks be to God,
that God doesn't really "zap" anyone
for their church contribution.

So what in the world can we preach from all this?
Well maybe the truth,
that sits right there plain as day
...God doesn't need to zap anyone
on account of their church contribution
or anything else.

God's love often, if not always,
is that kind of love
that lets us have what's coming to us.
Our decisions are our own,
and have been from that very first time in the garden.
Ever since we've had to own up to what we've done.

God's presence has always been there
—not zapping us left and right—
but loving us even when
we've done the wrong thing.
For Ananias and Sapphira,
holding back was the wrong thing.

But it wasn't the wrong thing
the way you might be thinking.
It isn't likely
that if we don't contribute
to the stewardship campaign
that any of us will be zapped.

But if we don't rise to the challenge of generosity,
of Christian generosity
that is the foundation of Christian stewardship
then there is a threat of death.

Here's what I mean;
if we fail to respond to God's grace for us
by the way we live and so ignore
the needs around us;
or if we behave and craft our lives
as though we are to be served
rather than serve others;
"if we don't respond to God's generosity
with some generosity of our own
...that is, if we hold back...
then something in us dies,
just as surely as if our heart stopped beating."⁶

"I'm tired of giving on Good Samaritan Sundays;
we can't take care of everyone
and other churches have stopped giving.
Those people ought to stop spending money
on tv's and cars and get jobs."
Zap

"I don't like the hymns
that they pick
so I'm just not going to sing."
Zap

"Didn't Jesus say
we'd have the poor with us always?
What I don't give doesn't really matter."
Zap

⁶ ibid

“This church isn’t really
the type of place for
those people.
Zap

“I’m so tired of church politics,
I’m just not going to go.”
Zap

“I’ve already given enough.
Time for someone else to step up.”
Zap

This story of Ananias and Sapphira
isn’t really about contributions.
It is however a lesson
on what it means to be generous toward God.

God asks for our whole selves,
not just an hour on Sunday;
not just a Sunday or two a year.
And not just our money.

When we hold back our whole selves from God,
something inside of us is zapped.
When we don’t bring all of who we are,
our shortcomings and victories,
our failures and successes,
our hearts, minds, and souls;
when we don’t bring our time,
our energy,
our resources to God,
something tender and precious in us dies.
That’s what this is about.

**God doesn’t ask
for our money or our lives,
he asks for both.**

Because for most of us,
they are one in the same.
We can't open our hearts to God
and keep our wallets closed.⁷

I love what one of our African American preachers
said a few years ago when the MLK service was here.

It was time for the offering
and he got up and talked about
the good news.

“The good news is
there is enough money
to make sure black children
and white children,
there is enough money
to make sure all children
have enough to eat every day.”

“The good news is
that there is enough money
to fix the problem of homelessness in Hickory.”

“The good news is
that there is enough money
to build affordable safe housing
for everyone in our city.”

“Oh yes,” he said “the good news is
there is enough money to all of this and more.”

“The bad news is,
it is still in your pocket.”
And then he sat down.

When we hold back,
whether it is time or money
or our gifts for ministry
we cut ourselves off from that which gives us life
...because by holding back,

⁷ ibid

Ananias and Sapphira cut themselves off
from a community whose lifeblood
was in generous sharing.

It wasn't that their gift to the church was small
—it likely wasn't.
But they held back from God;
they wouldn't let God have access
to all the parts of their lives
and in that they revealed
where their true loyalties lay.⁸

You know, some stories in scripture
just aren't meant to be preached.

But the stories that remind us
that the God we serve
asks for our whole selves;
the story of God who asks
that when we follow him,
we hold nothing back;
the story of a believers
deciding they would generously share
what they have
so that no one was in need...
that is a story we need to hear again and again.

That is the kind of story
encourages us to be extra.
To go above and beyond,
to push and challenge ourselves.
Even in stewardship season,
we can be extra.

⁸ ibid