

April 8, 2018
2nd Sunday of Easter

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“More...Or Less”

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Acts 4:32-5:11

Now 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. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There 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. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet. But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet.' 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? 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!' Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him. After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter 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.' Then 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.' Immediately 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. And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

More...Or Less

Over twenty years ago in Colorado, an initiative was on the ballot that would have eliminated the property tax exemption for some non-profit organizations. In the language of the amendment and all of the commercials arguing for and against it, there were lists of the organizations that would be affected: the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scouts, Kiwanis and Rotary clubs, hospitals and churches. In a long list of organizations dedicated, in one way or another, to making our world a better place, was the church of Jesus Christ.

Which begs the question: what sets the church apart from any other club? What makes the church different from these worthy organizations? They serve the community – so do we. They have large group gatherings – here we are! They offer opportunities to learn about and discuss the significant issues of our time just as we do. They hold long, somewhat dull meetings we are guilty of that!

But wait a minute, some would exclaim! The church is more than that. It is our faith that sets us apart. Clubs do not marry people or bury people. Clubs are not generally involved at every step along life's path. A club does not baptize. A club does not gather around the Lord's Table.

And all those things may be true, yet they still don't get at the heart of what truly sets the church apart from all the wonderful non-profit organizations that bring people together to do good.¹ So: what does it mean to be the church? What makes us, the Church of the Covenant, a church, and not just a club?

In the weeks after Easter, I am always drawn to preach from the book of Acts, to hear the stories of how Jesus's followers went from disciples to apostles those sent to share that good news that Jesus was not just crucified but raised from the dead. Every year, I go to this book longing for stories about the early church where everyone got along and focused on serving God, where no one argued about the music or the format of the bulletin or how much we should spend on mission or personnel or the building.

This year, when I read the passage assigned for today, it really hit that sweet spot. "Now 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." Doesn't that sound like what the church is supposed to be? A place where there is unity the whole group was of one heart and soul and where this unity led to extraordinary generosity it touched not only their hearts and souls but their wallets!

They shared everything! There was not a needy person among them! In fact, some of the members of this community were so moved that they not only shared whatever money they had they went and sold their homes and their property, and

¹ Mark Ramsey, "Something Worth Sacrifice," Central Presbyterian Church, Denver, CO, October 27, 1996.

then they brought that money to the community. A man named Joseph did just that, and it earned him a name change that's a big deal in the Bible – he went from Joseph to Barnabas, which means “son of encouragement.” In other words, he became the example everyone else was supposed to follow. This is where today's assigned reading ends, and if we stopped there, we might be left thinking that what makes the church, the church, is complete and total unity and extraordinary generosity which, if we're honest, might make us a little worried.

The truth is, we probably find it pretty hard to relate to Barnabas, the one who sells his property and gives all the proceeds to the community, and a lot easier to relate to Ananias and Sapphira, the ones who sell their property and give a big chunk of the proceeds to the community, but keep some back for themselves. Unfortunately, we then have to grapple with the fact that when the misrepresentation of their gift is discovered, they both drop dead.

It is understandable that the assigned passage for today ends with Joseph becoming Barnabas and leaves out the story of Ananias and Sapphira altogether. It's understandable, but it's not helpful. For one thing, chapters and verses in the Bible were added long after the stories were written down, so it is safe to assume that we are supposed to read these stories together, especially since...did you notice this? ...this unified, generous group of believers is not referred to as a church, until chapter 5, verse 11. Only after Sapphira repeats her husband's lie, drops dead and is buried next to Ananias, do we read, “And great fear seized the whole church...”

That is the first time in the Book of Acts that the church is called the church. Which means that the church is about much more than the unity and generosity that characterized it for no more than a hot second. The church is also a place where, from its very beginning, people failed to live up to those utopian ideals.

What happened to Ananias and Sapphira was truly awful no wonder it filled the other members of the community with fear. And, of course, it's possible – maybe even probable that this story didn't unfold exactly as it is presented here. The husband and then the wife dropping dead at Peter's feet the moment their lie is discovered it's a bit over-dramatic, isn't it? But this is the way it was remembered, even if in reality, months or years passed between the discovery of the lie and Ananias and Sapphira's deaths. The church told this story in this way to make a point.²

To make a point about what makes the church, the church. Now if that point is that if we don't sell everything we have and give the money to the church, then God will strike us dead, well, I'd suggest we all stop reading the Bible right now and form a

² Amy Miracle, “The ‘S’ Word, sermon preached at Broad Street Presbyterian Church on October 24, 2010.

different kind of club. But the conversation between Peter and Ananias and Sapphira suggests that this isn't the point. Peter doesn't seem to be upset that this couple held back some of the proceeds of the sale; what has him so upset is that they lied about it. They claimed that they were giving everything, when in fact they were giving some, not all, of what they had earned. It wasn't what they gave that was so egregious, it was that they lied about it.

And if the point of this story that the church is a place where lies are simply not tolerated; in fact, where lies can get you killed by a vengeful, intolerant God, then I would also suggest we look somewhere else for community.

If we read that story in isolation, we might think that is exactly the point. But when we look back at the community described at the end of chapter 4, we see none of that. In those few verses, we see this incredible image of a community of believers whose core values are unity and generosity, not vindictiveness and intolerance. Remember, this is the earliest community that formed around the belief that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus revealed God to the world. Could it be that they held onto this terrible story of Ananias and Sapphira because they realized that the biggest threat to their existence did not come from outside their community, but from within it? That although their fragile, hope- and love-filled community had been breathed into existence by God's own Holy Spirit, it was at serious risk of being derailed by the fear and deceit of its own members?

If we read these two stories together, as I believe they are meant to be read, we discover that what makes the church the church is that it is not the ideal community described in Acts 4:32-37. Nor is it just the community of Acts 5:1-11 where one couple's mistake leads to them being shamed to death by the community's leaders. What makes the church the church is both these things, together.

As Matt Skinner puts it, "Throughout history churches have always been communities of both self-giving (Acts 4:32-37) and false commitment to others (Acts 5:1-11), as well as everything in between." He goes on, "As I look across my own life, I have found within the church incredible generosity financial and otherwise. And yet I have also encountered in the church some of the most self-centered, destructive, manipulative behavior I've ever seen."³

The church is indeed a place where people are inspired to give of themselves in extraordinary ways, and it is also a place where people sometimes act out their deeply human fears and flaws by creating a false impression of their commitment. By holding back the self, God calls us all to give more of, by demonstrating contempt for the values of unity and generosity. The church is both of these things,

³ Matthew L. Skinner, "On Why (Some) People Don't Give Money to Their Church." HuffPost, The Blog, August 26, 2015. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/matthew-l-skinner/on-why-some-people-dont-g_b_8038674.html

and yet, in the midst of all that contradiction and confusion and ugliness, it is also how God has chosen to manifest in the world the self-giving love revealed in Jesus.

This week marked the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. On the day after his assassination, cities across the nation were bracing for another night of riots, and city officials in Boston were especially worried, because the great singer James Brown was scheduled to give a concert. City officials eventually decided to let the concert go on and to broadcast it live on public television, hoping this would keep most people home and off the streets. The gamble worked, but in the middle of the concert, there was a moment where it looked like a riot might break out as a group of young men rushed the stage, pushing past the police officers surrounding it.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute,” James Brown said when it happened. “It’s all right, it’s all right. Can’t y’all just let us do the show together? We are black, don’t make us all look bad. Let us do the show.” He’s talking down the men rushing the stage, but he’s also talking down the police, trying to de-escalate the situation. “I ask the police to step back,” he said, “so I can get some respect for my people. We’re all black. Let’s respect ourselves.” And then James Brown says to everyone, his audience, the police, all those watching on television, “Are we together or are we ain’t? Are we together?” Ultimately, Brown was credited with keeping Boston calm that night, and some would argue it came down to that three-word question: “Are we together?”⁴

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was once asked what he thought was the most radical claim the Christian faith makes. He considered for a moment, and then said, “The most radical claim Christianity makes is: Together, we are the Body of Christ.” So: what makes the church different from all of those wonderful non-profits serving our community? What makes the church, the church?

Maybe it is that together, at our most unified and at our most divided. Together, at our most generous and at our most begrudging. Together, at our most honest and at our most deceptive. Together, at our bravest and out our most fearful; Together, at our shiny best and our ugly worst. It is when we are all these things, together, that we are, indeed, the broken and bruised and bleeding and tortured and healed and restored and resurrected and beloved. The body of Christ. together, we are the church..

Amen.

⁴ I first heard this story on the “It’s Been a Minute” podcast with Sam Sanders on Friday, April 6, 2018. Additional information was found here: <http://theweek.com/articles/473785/did-james-brown-save-boston>.