

ANANIAS & PETER & ME & YOU

No matter what you have thought or heard from others, this is not my favorite Scripture passage. On the other hand, I have wanted to preach from this text on a Stewardship Sunday for many years, and never quite got the nerve to do so. It does not seem to be a story about mercy and forgiveness. It seems rather to be a story about honesty, justice, and fair play. Since honesty, justice, and fair play are not qualities we tend to honor very much in the Christian church, this has never been a widely favorite passage.

So what do you think? Shall we revise our “We Recall” statement? No more “moving earnestly toward tithing to our church.” Instead: “Tithe or drop dead.” It has troubled many of us from time to time (before we got jaded enough to be used to it) that some of our members give to support the church and its purposes with sincere and open-hearted devotion: time, energy, money, prayers – the whole enchilada – while always there are others among us who give so little that if the records were published, it would be quite embarrassing. Of course, I am not talking about people who give little because they have little. The widow’s mite has always been highly regarded in our tradition. Jesus appreciated the widow’s mite even more than the much larger gifts of those who had abundance. I don’t think any of us have a hard time understanding that.

But we tend to forget our truth when we start focusing on raising budgets. Christian giving is never about raising a budget. Christian giving is about allegiance and gratitude to our Lord. If as a people we have allegiance and gratitude toward our Lord, whatever the budget turns out to be will be just fine. It is no longer about us cajoling or persuading each other. We are the *ecclesia* – the people of Jesus; whatever our love for our Lord brings forth, that is the only viable resource for the LIFE we have together.

It surprises some people to learn that for a short time, the early church was a true commune. Jesus’ command for His followers to love one another resulted in a decision in the early days of the Jerusalem church to pool all their resources. “From each according to their ability – to each according to their need.” (Karl Marx) Love does move us in the direction of generosity; it does cause us to want to share our resources; it does give us a caring for each other that does not want anyone among us to be in need if we can help it. So the early *ecclesia* in Jerusalem had become a true commune.

The concept is appealing to this day. In the mid-1960s, many church folk were talking about finding a more communal pattern of life again. Did we all have to have three cars or five television sets? Maybe we could buy houses near each other and share a lot of things: have an extended family co-op; have our children growing up knowing each other much better, and knowing more than two adults who cared about them – and on and on.

I was a Pastor in Altadena at the time, and one of our Study Groups (Disciple Bands) decided to study the possibilities of communal living more earnestly. For a whole year, half of our meeting time each week was devoted to bringing information and discussing the possibilities. In the beginning we were pretty excited and thought we would figure out some dramatic ways to move in this new direction to become a commune in some fashion. But most of the communes we studied were dismal and short-lived. Many fell into the traps of lust or greed that should have surprised only the neophytes. The most successful communes – like The Bruderhof – had sacrificed too much individual freedom to remain appealing to us. Under the surface, a true commune was more unwieldy than we had realized. What happens when a family needs to move to a different town or state? Who decides what the “fair share” is that they take with them? Eventually we abandoned our study and our hopes. I assume it was also such realities that stopped the commune pattern in the early church. What happened when the Christian community in Jerusalem realized that the persecution was getting worse and worse and many of them needed to move to Antioch? We do not hear of a pure communal pattern in the New Testament ever again.

But back in Altadena we got a sudden shock. It became clear to us that while our church was not a pure commune, it was still a commune in many ways. We had pooled our resources to build a lovely sanctuary, offices, meeting rooms, a wonderful gym and fellowship hall. Lots of our men played volleyball together every Saturday morning. Our children had numerous programs and met in our mutually owned facility on weekends and all through the week. We were a commune in many ways. And if we stopped sending so much money overseas, we could start taking care of the needs of some of our members a lot better too.

So we are a commune here too – partial, but still very true. Maybe some of us wish there were not so many Ananias and Sapphira types among us. My father – not the heavenly one; the earthly one –

always insisted that “Love your neighbor means first of all that you carry your fair share of the load.” That’s pure heresy in most of the liberal churches of our age. But is it really an unchristian or anti-Christian precept? It is part of grace and trust to be willing to ask for help, and to receive it with gratitude when we need it. But as an attitude or “way of life,” is it really more Christian to be a freeloader – to live off of the caring and dedication of others? We never leave such things to mere human logic or personal opinion. We watch and try to learn from Jesus.

What happens when Jesus heals people? Lots of them go back to work. Most of them want to. Jesus heals Peter’s mother-in-law. (Matthew 8:15) “*He touched her hand and the fever left her, and [in the very same sentence] she rose and began to serve him.*” I have actually heard Disciple Band people complain about this. “She was just sick; give her a break,” they say. But for many of us, if we are no longer sick, not only are we grateful for the healing, we also want to be useful again.

In the fifth chapter of John we get the clearest picture of Jesus’ attitude toward a freeloader. The guy has been a beggar at the Pool of Bethesda for thirty-eight years. Jesus heals him against his wishes (very rare), and the fellow does everything he can think of to get Jesus in trouble with the authorities. He is furious at being healed, because now he will have to go to work and support himself.

There are always some among us who not only refuse to carry their fair share of the load, they like to sit on the load, making it even heavier. Some of them use the energy they save in this manner to criticize and give advice to those who are doing the heavy lifting. How nice if just once we could play the part of Peter and say, “Drop dead!”

Okay, I have had my fun, so now we need to get serious. The fact is that this passage about Ananias and Sapphira does not support any of these comments. So back up with me, and let us go over it again more slowly.

First of all, Ananias and Sapphira brought a handsome gift to the church. That’s right! They sold some property and brought enough of the proceeds to the church that most people would have just assumed that it was the full price of the property they sold. By any of the standards any of us would apply to ourselves, Ananias and Sapphira were being exceedingly generous. The church and its leaders

should have been grateful. If any of you sold some property and brought the lion's share of the proceeds to this church, would we not be amazed and grateful? If you brought ten percent, we would think it awesome; Ananias and Sapphira must have brought seventy-five or eighty percent of the proceeds to the church, or there would have been no issue.

So the first thing we need to be really clear about is this: **IT HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH THE AMOUNT OF MONEY!** This is Stewardship Sunday (Covenant Sunday), and we are not trying to raise a budget. Well, maybe a few among us still think in such terms, but if so, that is unfortunate and misleading. Stewardship is not about the amount of money you bring.

Peter goes out of his way to make this really clear. There is no coercion here. He reminds Ananias that the property belonged to Ananias; that he had a right to do anything he wanted to with it. Even after he sold it, Peter says that Ananias still had every right to do whatever he wanted to with the money. No blame – no guilt.

Are we clear here? We live in a secular society where the values and goals and assumptions all around us are operating all the time. The influence and the assumptions of the culture outside the church are insidious and constant. It's easy to get careless and confused if we do not stay alert and constantly remember our own values and goals.

What are the first questions the secular society asks? How many members do you have? What is the size of your budget? How beautiful and big is the building? How big is the parking lot? What are the last questions the secular society will ask? How faithful are the people? How much do they love God? How much do they love each other? Do they really believe God loves them? Are they still afraid of death? Are they joyful about the spiritual Life, no matter what's happening in the physical life all around them?

The issues can get more confusing because many church organizations in our culture have gone over to the secular values and purposes all around them – until they think that being successful as a church is the same thing as being successful in our society. Then even some of the churches are asking: how many members; what's the size of the budget; who ever heard of Jesus? So it remains true that it is necessary for us as Christians to pray every day.

May I repeat? IT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH THE AMOUNT OF MONEY. How poverty-stricken do we think God is, if we are trying to suggest that the amount of money is what matters? We can keep our little church alive for one more year, or God will starve to death? Nobody really thinks that. We merely act and talk like we think that, when we get careless. And when we do, strangely enough we keep the church at low ebb – at the low end of its survival level. We are unable to fully fund our programs and purposes, even the ones we say we care about. And we treat those who work for us with little respect or appreciation. Usually the Minister is treated a little bit better, but even that is not always certain.

It has nothing to do with the amount of money. IT HAS TO DO WITH **WHY** WE BRING OUR MONEY. Civilization, for all its benefits, clouds many things. It is possible to go into a grocery store, buy two pounds of ground beef, and never think about the steer that died to provide this food, the farmer who worked for two years to bring it to market, or all the other twenty-five people who helped along the way to bring this morsel to our table.

Do we remember? Money is a *system* of value; it has no value in and of itself. It represents a certain established amount of labor. As long as we agree to let money represent the value of honest labor, society can function reasonably well. That is oversimplified, to be sure, but it's close enough. As we say: Money is a great tool, but a poor master; a good resource, but a horrible idol. And one of the worst of all gods.

So the question is WHY: Why do people bring money to God? Some of us, at least, want to be partners with God. We want to help with the work of the Kingdom. We want to belong to those who are working with instead of against God. Many things go on in the society around us that have little to do with God or God's Kingdom, but that is not sufficient for us. We are the *ecclesia* – the people of Jesus. And once reconciled to God, we want to be part of what God is trying to do in this world. So we bring our labor. And if we cannot haul a live sheep around with us, we turn it into money and bring the money: the symbol of our labor.

The church does not always use the money as well as we might wish or for the exact things we might wish. That is always true in a broken world – a world that does not know or honor God. On the other hand, we try hard and we do the best we can. As imperfect as we are,

do you know other organizations that love Jesus more or try to serve God better? If so, you will doubtless find your way into them.

In the old language: Jesus is our King, and we always bring tribute to our King. In former times, people wanted their King to be strong and effective because their own welfare depended on it. In any case, if you do not bring tribute to your King, you do not *have* a King. As we say in the world of chess: Every move you make reflects the position of your King.

Why do we bring money to God? Because we love God. Because of our great and growing gratitude. Because there is no place else in life that can touch the meaning, the grace, the forgiveness, the joy that we find with God. To be sure, not everybody feels this way. And the truth is that if they do not feel this way, they should keep their money. No matter how much they give, if it comes from the wrong reasons or the wrong motives, it will do them no good and it will do the Kingdom no good. Of course, that is the very thing we should be realizing from this story about Ananias and Sapphira.

IT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH THE AMOUNT OF MONEY.
IT HAS EVERYTHING TO DO WITH **WHY** WE BRING GIFTS TO GOD:
What is our true motive? And finally, IT IS **ENTIRELY** ABOUT OUR
RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.

So what is Ananias' problem? He wants to look good in the eyes of others. He is not trying to please God or do what he thinks God wants him to do. Ananias is eager for his reputation in the community to be better than the reality of his devotion to God. False motives and counterfeit faith are the bane of the Christian Life, and certainly they are the bane of the Christian church.

Peter sums it up: Ananias and Sapphira are lying to God. It is not about the amount; it is *entirely* about their relationship with God. The outer show is not what matters. The way it looks in the eyes of others is not what matters. Whether it satisfies the amount some committee made up about a humanly contrived budget is not what matters. What matters is our relationship with God.

So at second glance, this passage is not about any pressure being used to persuade Ananias or Sapphira to give or to give more. They are completely free to give as much or as little as they wish. There is no coercion. Only, they do not seem to know this. It reminds us once again that Christianity is an inside job. Ananias and his wife

are not in trouble for being stingy or greedy. They are in trouble because they have pretended a level of devotion and caring that they do not have. They want to look good on the outside, but the problem is on the inside. The problem, as always, is with their true relationship with God.

Well, it's Covenant Sunday. Covenant Sunday is about what we want to bring to our God and to the church of God's Messiah. The church, for all its flaws, is still the best representative we know about – the best carrier we know about – of the traditions, the information, the WAY of Life our Lord invites us into. But at its core, stewardship is still about our relationship with God. If not, then this is not a church, no matter what the sign says out in front. And we are not about our Father's business, or about Jesus' purposes either. Of course, I do not believe that. I think this really is a church – one of the best I have ever known. But we shall see.

Never mind Stewardship Sunday for a minute. Are we going to leave this story about Ananias and Sapphira where we found it? This is a bad story, poorly told. Apparently it circulated from the earliest days of the Jerusalem church. Paul hasn't been picked up yet; that's the ninth chapter of Acts, and we are only in the fifth chapter with this story. And Luke, who is reporting the story to us, will not come into the picture until he meets Paul twelve or thirteen years after that.

So what happened to grace and forgiveness? Some of us have found it and recovered from mistakes and blunders far worse than anything mentioned in this story. Did anybody miss Ananias and Sapphira after they dropped dead? Did Jesus love Ananias and Sapphira? How can we even ask? Maybe Ananias and Sapphira did not love the Jerusalem church enough to pool everything they had, but in a short time everybody in the church will agree with them. Communal living is a beautiful theory, but it does not work out for very long in most circumstances.

Beyond any of that, Ananias and Sapphira have a sensitivity and a remorse so great that it undoes them. Why do you think they dropped dead? That is called repentance. That is where most conversions come from. It's so sad that they did not hang around long enough to discover what the mercy and love of Jesus are really like. It's so sad they did not hang around long enough to find out what the faith and friendship of a true *ecclesia* can really be like. So what's the missing scene?

I sometimes long for the missing scenes. In this case, it is when Ananias replies to Peter: “Hey, we made a really big mistake. I really am very embarrassed and very sorry. But you told us you sank once in the lake too. And you said you had heard the rooster’s cry. So give us another chance. Give us back half of the money we already gave you and forgive us, and we will try to learn how to pray and be a better part of this community from now on.” What do you think Peter would have replied to that?

I know; I’m the one who picked this passage, and I try to learn from it. But this is a bad story, poorly told. I am so hopeful that here in this church, we will stay on the Path long enough to have better stories to tell.