

## Acts 4:32-5:10 – Ananias and Sapphira

You may very well have never heard the story of Ananias and Sapphira. Has anyone?

It never shows up in either lectionary. While the lectionary doesn't leave all the difficult stories out, this one is apparently beyond the pale.

Perhaps your first reaction is, seriously? No way could this have really happened. The ancient writers of scripture, and the God who inspired them, didn't always equate true with factual the way we do. So maybe it did happen this way...or maybe it didn't. Either way, the story captures a truth that goes deeper than fact.

It's probably a story where you have to move beyond, "did this really happen?" to "what does this story tell us about life in Christ?"

The first part of the reading describes the communal life of the newborn church. This is basically the description of a commune. As an economic and political ideology, this description would be the definition of communism. But communism as an ideology hadn't been invented yet, and that's not really what this describes.

But it does describe a way of life. It describes a way of life inspired by the teachings of Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit. That inspiration and power make people want to be part of a whole new way of structuring their community. It's a community that takes seriously Jesus' proclamation that he came to bring good news to the poor.

It doesn't appear that the community was required to give everything over to the apostles for the good of the community.

When Peter confronts Ananias, he says, the property was yours to do with what you wanted. That would be a difference from communism as an ideology.

Instead, it seems the people *wanted* to live this way. The rich wanted the poor to have what they needed.

This was a sizable community. Remember we heard last week that 3000 people were added to the church the day of Pentecost. But it's still nothing like the size and complexity of our modern social structure. When we read this, most of us would probably say, well that's just not practical in our world. It actually doesn't seem to have lasted in the early church either.

But there are still some very important take-aways as we seek to be the church in our world, especially in light of everything that's happened this past year.

So let's turn to Ananias and Sapphira. You'll notice that what got them in trouble was the lie, not holding some of their money back.

They didn't have to sell, and they didn't have to turn over all the proceeds. They could have kept the land. They could have sold it and told Peter, we're nervous about letting go of all the money, but here's what we can give.

So why did they lie? As is often true in the Bible stories, this one is a little short on the answer to why.

So let's imagine ourselves in their shoes. All around you, you see your neighbors caught up in the excitement of this new way of life. They're selling possessions, laying money at the apostles' feet. They all trust that they will be taken care of.

But you're not sure.

Here are some concerns that might come to mind.

What if it doesn't work? What if the apostles get greedy and don't give us what we need?

Or...well, if people don't have to work for what they need, they'll get lazy.

Or...It's not fair...I've worked for what I have, they should have to, too.

Or...What if I do this and then there's not enough for me? What if they can't take care of me when I'm old and can't work?

Ananias and Sapphira were likely afraid...they couldn't quite trust that this would be good for them.

Yet they didn't want to let anyone know they had these doubts. There's this huge human tendency to want to look good before our peers. Ananias and Sapphira wanted the good opinion of their neighbors.

So, they tried to make it look like they too were part of this new community. But because they didn't really trust it...because they held back, and lied about it...they never *really* were a part of it.

They put themselves outside the community. They put themselves outside the new life Jesus' death and resurrection brought to the community. That's why the story tells of their dramatic death. Whether it was actual literal death or not, it was death. It was a choice to live outside the life-giving new creation Jesus ushered in.

So, what are the take-aways for us? What does this story tell us about being the church in the world we live in now?

First – Jesus’ death and resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit weren’t just for the sake of us as individuals. It was to create a new people...a new community. That new community would ensure that all God’s beloved had what they needed to flourish. That new community would also model for the world a new, more loving way of life, and it would welcome others into that life.

That’s actually the same purpose God had for choosing and shaping the people of Israel thousands of years before Jesus. God’s intention from the beginning was to form a people. Our focus on individualism can undermine God’s purpose for us.

Second, our lives are tied to each other. Ananias and Sapphira set themselves outside the life of the community and died as a result. While maybe most of the time for us that won’t be literal death, this past 14 months has shown how deadly focusing just on ourselves can be.

Our biggest failure as a nation during the pandemic has been the failure to understand that what we were asked to do was for the sake of the community. It’s never been about just you and your rights.

Where else have we missed out on the life offered by Christ because we couldn’t see beyond ourselves? Who have we placed outside that new life? What has the community missed out on because we’ve rejected certain groups and held other groups down?

Third, Christian unity is not just an ideal...it’s a social practice that leaves no one in need. Christianity in our world often thinks faith is so much about believing the right things. But this sort of community shows something different.

Yes, it took a tremendous amount of real faith...trust. But that trust led people to act. Think about the kind of faith and trust it would take for people to give up what they had and give it for the good of the community.

The book of Acts makes it very clear that being a follower of Jesus is a way of life, not a check list of right beliefs. It’s a way of life that looks out for the needs of others, especially the most vulnerable.

And finally, this way of life is hard. Our basic nature is not to live this way. I’m guessing as we read through the story, you all had all kinds of reasons why this would never work.

It's God that empowers this sort of life. Luke says that God's grace was upon the community. It's God's grace that inspired them to live this way...to live towards the direction of God's kingdom. And it's the power of the Spirit that made them able to do it.

God's grace is still upon us. We receive God's grace in the word and sacraments of worship. We receive God's grace through this community. We even received God's grace through the internet and telephones and US postal service as we worked to stay connected during the pandemic.

The church's primary aim is to bear God's grace to one another and to the world. Word, sacrament, and community will always be how we do that.

But we may need to reexamine the specific how to's of that task. We will need to examine how well the church has lived into its calling. We will need to confess...and repent...in those areas we have failed, and be open to change.

And above all, we will need to trust. That same grace that was upon that very early Christian community is also upon us. We may be tired. We may be discouraged. The past 14 months has taken its toll on us.

But God still longs for us to experience Christian community in a way that allows all life to flourish. And God's grace will never fail us.