

Truth  
Acts 4:32-5:11  
July 9, 2023  
West Valley Presbyterian Church

1. Since Pentecost, we've been going through the passages of Acts which tell us about the early church. There's a reason why I have chosen to do that!

A. Peter and the rest of the apostles were responding to God's call to do something completely new, that they'd never done before – build a church – which they had no idea how to do. They'd never even started a synagogue before, let alone start an entirely new worshiping congregation. They had no one to advise them and tell them what to do. All they could do was pray, and ask for the Holy Spirit to guide them and direct them in starting this new thing. Which they did. They prayed and then they acted in whatever situation they confronted.

B. We also are responding to God's call to do something new, that none of us have ever done before. We are called to host and support a church plant, while allowing the planters to operate, not under the authority of the Session but under the authority of a joint body comprised of members of the Presbytery and the church. I've never done that before. Neither have any of us. None of us have a manual for what we're supposed to do. But we do feel that God is calling us to do this new thing. It's exciting, and it's also scary. We are definitely stepping out in faith, just as Peter and the rest of the apostles did.

C. So what do we do? We don't have a manual. But we do have the example of the earliest church leaders to follow. We can, and I hope we do, pray constantly, asking for the Holy Spirit's guidance in what we say, in the decisions we make, and in what we do with our money and our talents.

D. And, we can study the example of the earliest church leaders, shown to us in the first few chapters of Acts. That's why we've been studying Acts in such detail ever since the end of May, and that's why we'll continue to study Acts for the rest of the summer.

E. Today we are going to look at one of the most difficult passages in all the New Testament – the story of Ananias and Sapphira. I've really struggled with this, and considered omitting it. But as I've prayed about it, it seems to me that we do need to look at this passage as a congregation, as harsh as it is, because it's about truthfulness before God. The specific instance has to do with the donation of money, but the larger issue is about truthfulness. So. Hear now the word of God as it comes to us from Acts 4:32-5:11.

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

<sup>32</sup> All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. <sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all <sup>34</sup> that there

were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales <sup>35</sup> and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), <sup>37</sup> sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

**5** Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. <sup>2</sup> With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

<sup>3</sup> Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? <sup>4</sup> Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

<sup>5</sup> When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. <sup>6</sup> Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

<sup>7</sup> About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup> Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

"Yes," she said, "that is the price."

<sup>9</sup> Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

<sup>10</sup> At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. <sup>11</sup> Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. // Here ends the reading of God's holy Word. (Join me in saying, ) Thanks be to God.

2. This is a hard text.

A. First, because it's hard for us to even imagine selling our houses, and giving all the money to the church leaders to distribute among the poor members. After all, for most of us, our houses are our major asset; and if we sell them and give all the money away, then we become poor – right? How is that helpful?

1. So, it might lower our discomfort to realize that, even back then, not everyone cashed out their homes or land. We're told that "from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales [and that means ALL the money from the sales] and put it at the apostles' feet." Not everyone did this, and not all the time- it was more on an as-needed basis.

2. And, it might help lower our discomfort to remember that such exceeding generosity didn't last very long. Right after Stephen's death, the church was scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, which we'll hear about in Chapter 8. They weren't physically all together any more. Logistically, they no longer shared everything they had with one another, because they couldn't. They weren't in the same place. They couldn't do what Barnabas did. So after the Christians were scattered, the congregations which they formed in their new areas would take up collections to support impoverished congregations – which included those in Judea. We have a lot of information about that from Paul's letters.

3. And that is still what churches do to this day, through their individual church contributions, or their denominational missions budgets. For example, remember the disaster of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans? It was the churches who sent volunteers who helped people muck out their flooded houses and apartments. I was there; the people I saw helping were all from churches around the country. It was churches around the country who sent large donations to help sister churches rebuild. Yes, the government helped with housing and with rebuilding, as it should; but churches were rebuilt by the assistance of other Christians. We might not be like Barnabas; but to this very day, we are still major contributors of time, money and volunteer effort around the world. As we should be.

B. The second reason why we find this text to be so hard is because we've all lied at some point during our lives. Who among us has never lied, ever, in their whole lives? Even Peter lied three times about whether he knew Jesus. And he felt terrible about it. When Jesus turned around in the courtyard on the night of his arrest, and looked at him, Peter broke down and wept. Even once he'd been forgiven, he still felt badly about those lies he'd told, as we see in John 21. Perhaps that was why he spoke so forcefully to Ananias and Sapphira – because he knew from personal experience that lying to God was a terrible thing to do.

1. So it might help us lower our discomfort level if we remember that the case of Ananias and Sapphira is the only recorded case, ever, of people dying after being confronted with lying to God, out of all Christians then and now, which by now add up to billions of people. It's not likely to happen to us.

3. So why preach on this text at all, if it's a hard text, if we've all lied at one point or another, if the lie in question is about the circumstances of a financial donation which is no longer applicable, and if we're not likely to end up like Ananias and Sapphira? Why not just skip over it and go on to the appointing of deacons, which we'll talk about next week?

4. I was tempted to skip it! But I decided not to, because I think we all need a reminder that God does indeed take lying very seriously. We need to remember that: speaking the truth is essential for our own sakes; it's essential for the sake of this church and all churches; it's essential for the sake of the people around us; and for the sake of our social institutions – our courts, our businesses, our schools.

A. In the gospel of John, chapter 14 v.6, Jesus says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." And in John 8:44, Jesus says that the devil has no truth in him; that he is a liar and the father of lies. So if we tell the truth, who are we drawing closer to? Whose spiritual energy are we soaking up? Who are we becoming more like? But if we lie, who are we drawing closer to? Whose spiritual energy are we soaking up? Who are we becoming more like? If we want to be more like Jesus, then we will draw closer to him, and that means that we will tell the truth. It's essential for our souls' sake.

B. Telling the truth is essential for the wellbeing of this and every church. For example, a megachurch in Bellevue, where my birth family lives, closed down about 9 years ago for many reasons. One of those reasons was dishonest business practices. The pastor had written a book and wanted it to get onto the NY Times Best Sellers list. He got his church to pay a marketing firm, that bought up 11,000 copies of the book with the church's money. The pastor made the Best Seller list, and used that to negotiate a multi-book deal with an evangelical publishing house. And then he lied about that business deal. If you had been a member of that church, could you have trusted that pastor to teach you how God wanted you to live? Why would anyone listen to a church that didn't tell the truth?

C. Telling the truth is essential for the sake of the people around us. For example, one day, many years ago, my son was visiting us in Sonora and he got a call from my mother. Now it was very unusual for my mother to call anyone; she was a quiet introvert and she had the beginnings of dementia. I heard my son's end of the conversation: "Oh, hi, grandma. No, I'm not in Canada, why would I be there? No, I'm not in jail. I'm visiting my parents in Sonora. Everything is fine." Turns out my mother was very nearly caught in one of the grandchild scams, where someone calls you and says, "Grandma, this is your grandson, and I really need help. Please don't tell my parents. I'm in jail in Canada for backing into somebody, and I have to get some money to post bail. Could you please go to Western Union and wire me \$5000?" My mom totally believed that scam artist, and she headed down to Western Union. The only reason she didn't wire the money was because the clerk said, "You might just want to call your grandson before you send this off." Liars like that break people's hearts, and leave them without savings.

5. Ananias and Sapphira each, separately, lied about how much money they had gotten from the sale of their property.

A. They didn't have to; they weren't trying to get a book deal! They could have told the truth; they could have said that they had sold the property for X amount, that they had decided to keep a percentage for themselves so that they would have something to live on, and that they were donating Y amount to the church. They could have been straightforward and honest.

B. The text doesn't tell us why they tried to conceal that they'd kept part of the sales price. Maybe because they wanted lots of kudos. After all, Barnabas had just gotten all kinds of kudos for selling his field and putting all the money at the apostles' feet. Maybe they wanted that status and honor too. We don't know. But it's such a sad thing, that wouldn't have happened if they had just told the truth.

6. When we are baptized, Jesus claims us as his brothers and sisters. We are adopted into God's family. And if we are part of God's family – which we are – then we will strive to be more like Jesus. We will strive to always speak the truth, just as Jesus did. We'll do our best to speak the truth even if it's embarrassing. Even if telling the truth would get us into trouble. When we lie, we are contaminating our own souls. And when we contaminate our own souls, that also contaminates the life we hold in common with our brothers and sisters in Christ. So, let's not do that. Let's pray, and let's ask the Holy Spirit to direct our words and our thoughts. //