

Balancing Accountability and Grace

Acts 4:32-5:11

Summer Series on Acts Week 5

July 7, 2019

There are stories that end with, “And they all lived happily ever after.” This is not one of those stories! And it’s not just Ananias and Sapphira who die. Acts chapter 5 marks a change in the book of Acts. Things in the early church were perfect for a time; and then something happened that would explain why things are not perfect for the rest of time. It’s a little like how in the book of Genesis, everything is perfect until Adam and Eve eat from the forbidden tree—and all of sudden, that paradise teeming with life becomes a place where there is death. The start of the Christian church has a parallel beginning. At the end of chapter four, Luke sums things up: the early church is like the Garden of Eden at first. Everything is perfect. No one has any need. People are coming to Christ and selling off their possessions, resulting in a Christian utopia. All for one and one for all!

But this utopia will not last. Sin will change things, and on some level, sin always leads to death. This week we will see how sin sometimes leads to the death of the sinner. And next week we will talk about Stephen, and see how sin sometimes leads to the death of innocent victims. And every week for the rest of the summer, we will see how sin led to the death of the extraordinary sharing and perfection of the early church. Read it for yourself and see if you can find a place after Acts 5 where someone sells their property and the whole Christian community lives together in exquisite communion.

To help us see the change, Luke employs the old “compare and contrast” technique. In chapter four, he mentions a Levite named Joseph, who was so inspired by the early church and its radical caring that he sold a field he owned and brought all the money and put it at the apostles’ feet. He was such a helpful person that the apostles gave him a new name: Barnabas, which means “son of encouragement.” Barnabas went on to do great things in the church. We will read more about him later in Acts.

But right after Barnabus, Luke shifts gears and tells us about Ananias and Sapphira. They sold a piece of property, and instead of laying all the money at the disciples’ feet like Barnabas, they withheld some for themselves. And, instead of going on to do great things in the church, they were killed.

This story is incomprehensible to us. Imagine if a husband and wife in our day sold their home and gave most of the proceeds to the church? We’d be jumping up and down. Say you sell your house for \$150,000, and you give 2/3 to the church. So you keep \$50,000 for yourself. Who cares? You’re still giving the church \$100K! That is a very generous gift. We would not know what to do with all that money if someone gave us a gift like that. Not that we wouldn’t figure it out, mind you. That is one problem we would work on until we had it solved, that is for sure!

But in the early church, there was a problem with Ananias and Sapphira's gift. People don't just drop dead on the spot for nothing. For one thing, they seemed to miss the point of selling the property. All for one and one for all only works if everyone puts in their all. It's like the Hokey Pokey—you can put in an arm or a leg, but eventually you gotta put your whole self in. Perhaps Ananias and Sapphira were hedging their bets to see if this church thing worked out.

But in the meantime, they wanted it to *appear* as if they were all in. I think that is the big issue here. They lied to the church about the money. They wanted to appear more generous and faithful than they really were. They missed the memo, that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Ananias and Sapphira thought they were pulling one over on a bunch of people. But really they were lying to God. The church isn't just a human organization. It is the body of Christ. There was more at stake here than they realized.

Okay, fine we say, it's important not to lie to God. But did they really have to die? Why not give Ananias and Sapphira a warning and a chance to repent? Exactly one year ago—it was July 8, 2018—I stood before you and preached my first sermon at Lima. In those early weeks together, we talked a lot about grace. We learned about prevenient grace, this Wesleyan idea that the Holy Spirit is always out ahead of us, planting seeds, lubricating pathways, always at work for good, showering people with grace to help prepare them to receive Christ. We talked about justifying grace, which puts us right with God. When we receive Christ, it's like we walk through the door to a new way of living, which we call the Christian life. That is why there is a third kind of grace, sanctifying grace, which helps us learn and grow. It carries us up the staircase toward maturity and fruitfulness. Prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. Grace is the bedrock of our faith. Which one of those kinds of grace would you say is at work in the story of Ananias and Sapphira? It doesn't seem to me that there is any grace in this story at all!

I think Luke gives us this story to illustrate how, because the church is made up of real people and lives in the real world, in addition to grace it will also have to be an agent of accountability. The Church is the Body of Christ and thus is called to be holy! Which is tricky because the people who make up the Church are sinners. Throughout its entire history, and for as long as the Church shall live, it will have to wrestle with balancing grace and accountability. What should it do when people within the church family resist sanctification and allow sin to manifest itself? What should we do with the unholy in our midst?

This is a hard question for us even now, even with 2,000 years of Church history and tradition under our belts. This is hard question for us even now as United Methodists, with our 898-page Book of Discipline. You'd think with a rule book that big there would be no more gray areas. But real life is complicated. I have a clergy colleague who asked me for advice one time, because a young woman in the church was stealing money from people's purses. It took time to figure out who the thief was in the congregation, but now there were two separate eyewitnesses who weren't sure what to do with what they say, so they went to the pastor. The pastor knew this behavior could not go on unchallenged. The thief would have to be held accountable. But the thief was the daughter of the choir director, who had been a member of the church for forty years and whose extended family and close friends made up about a fourth of the membership. How could they be fair, firm—and diplomatic???

For whatever reason, God was not worried about being diplomatic or fair with Ananias and Sapphira. They were struck dead for a pretty common sin, hypocrisy. We don't know why, and that bothers us. But there's something that bothers me even more. Even if Ananias' death was not preventable, what about Sapphira? I am really upset that no one went out and found Sapphira and warned her. Luke tells that "great fear seized all who heard about Ananias". Maybe they were so afraid they were paralyzed. We are supposed to love our neighbors as ourselves. I know I'd appreciate it if someone gave me a heads up if I was about to get into big trouble. Wouldn't it be loving to go and find Sapphira and give her a chance to tell the truth? Maybe people too stunned to talk to her. Or maybe they thought they should mind their own business. We don't know exactly what happened in those three hours between Ananias dying and Sapphira dying. But we do know that, for the first time, death marred the new Christian community. And it seems to me that, metaphorically, sin has been causing "death" in the church ever since.

But I can't be too hard on the people for not confronting Sapphira, because I am afraid of confrontation, too. A few weeks ago, I went out to run a few errands on Sunday afternoon. My first stop was the Lima post office, where I slid some bills and cards into the blue mailbox. As I was walking back to my car, I noticed a man come out of the Lima Beverage, pull a beer from the case he just purchased, get in his car, and as he sat in the drivers' seat, drink half a bottle of beer in one gulp. He then put the bottle in his cup holder, buckled his seat belt, and drove away.

It was a warm day but not hot, so we both had our car windows open. I remember thinking to myself, should I walk over to him and say, hey, you can't go around drinking and driving! I remember thinking to myself, maybe I should call 911. I remember thinking to myself, "But Dorry, you are on your way to do some shopping on a Sunday, and you are supposed to be observing the Sabbath! Get the log out of your own eye before worrying about the speck in someone else's!" And I also remember thinking, "What is going on in his life that on a beautiful Sunday afternoon, he is in so much pain that he has to have half a beer right this second, he can't even wait the five minutes until he gets home?"

I had never seen that man before. I had no personal responsibility to him, but I do have a responsibility to my community, so I prayed that he would get home safely and not injure himself or anyone else on the way home. But it left me feeling powerless and sad. Even if that man's "sin" didn't lead to any kind of harm or death as he drove home, witnessing it made me die a little inside. I think this is our human condition. Reading the book of Acts, it blows my mind that people were willing to sell their land and give all the money to the church—but not a single person was willing to go and tell Sapphira to get her act together. It just goes to show, holding each other accountable is the hardest thing we have to do in church.

But look at the consequences if we don't. When sin persists, there is always some kind of death! Last week, when we read about how Peter and John were called out by the authorities for healing the lame man, they were very clear in saying that it wasn't their power that healed the man, it was God's power. It was the name of Jesus that healed him. But in our story today, Luke never says whose power killed Ananias and Sapphira. It's hard to imagine they were killed by God's power, because we trust God to always use God's power for good. It's hard to image

them being killed by the apostles. We all know that expression, “If looks could kill”, but I don’t think any of us believe there is a dirty look in the world dirty enough to kill someone!

I think Luke never names the power that killed Ananias and Sapphira because there is no need to name it. When we separate ourselves from God, a kind of death occurs. Death is never God’s intentional will—but it is the natural consequence of violating God’s will. “The wages of sin is death”, the apostle Paul would later write. Every one of us, we can name ways our sinfulness has hurt the church. We have not always trusted. We have not always tithed. We have wanted to appear better than we are. We have not always done what is right. We have not always been courageous. Our sins have hurt the church. We have sinned and been sinned against. This is the truth. I started this sermon by saying, “There are stories that end with everyone lives happily ever after. This is not one of those stories.” The Church has suffered and died both literally and metaphorically from sin from its earliest days.

And yet the church survives and thrives. That is, I think, where the grace is in this story. The church is God’s agency for life. It is not just another human organization. It is the Body of Christ, drawn together and held together by the Spirit of the Living God! And because of that, the church is resilient. The church marches on. We are here today in this church, Christians are gathered everywhere on this day, as a living testament to God’s amazing grace.

As we come to the table today, let us do so with praise and thanksgiving for the Prevenient Grace that drew us here, the Justifying Grace that forgives and restores us, and the Sanctifying grace, that is working in us and moving us toward perfection. In the name of Jesus and for his sake, Amen.