

**ON BEING A REAL PERSON**  
**Acts 5:1-11**  
**Preached by Dr. Cahill**  
**Babcock Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, November 15, 2015**

Let me begin by saying this story of the untimely demise of Ananias and Sapphira is problematic. It's more suited to the Old Testament rather than the new. It parallels the Old Testament story of Achan, a foot soldier during the reoccupation of the Promised Land under Moses' successor Joshua. After the Israelites conquered Jericho the victors looted the Canaanites but all the spoils were to be kept for the community, therefore no embezzlement. Poor Achan pillaged a few valuables for himself and for his sin against the community he was stoned to death. Barbaric consequences right? Like it or not that was how the ancients punished wrong doers in ancient times.

So, how do we square this story with Christ's Gospel? You can't. Contrast Achan's fate with the woman caught in adultery in the New Testament. By stopping her stoning Jesus redefined the ethic of justice and established a more humane model for dealing with sinners.

Now the question is how do you explain the New Testament story of Ananias' and Sapphira's encounter with God's terrible, swift sword? As I said, this story is problematic even more so than Achan's since it's in the New Testament. So the question is, what can we find here that will enrich our sense of fidelity to Christ and each other?

First of all the moral of this story isn't "tithe or die." Instead the real lesson of this story is really about being authentic in your relationships with God and God's people instead of pretending to be something you're not because sooner than later you'll be found out one way or another.

Ananias and his wife Sapphira heard that a man named Joseph sold a field and handed over all the proceeds to the Jerusalem Church. For his heartfelt act of generosity the Apostles gave Joseph a new name, Barnabas, which means "a son of encouragement."

Seeing how Barnabas' reputation in the community soared, the misguided, ill-fated couple decided they wanted their fifteen minutes of fame too. So they conspired to follow Barnabas' example with a twist. They sold a piece of real estate with the intention of handing over to the church only a portion of the profit and secretly keeping the rest for themselves.

Keep in mind there was no hard and fast rule that everyone in the church had to turn over everything they owned to the Apostles. But that didn't stop people who owned land and houses from selling all they had and handing the proceeds over to the poor. They didn't have

to do it; they chose to do it in response to God's boundless love through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit enriching them with grace and truth.

Carefully read on and you'll find that Barnabas wasn't among those who sold all their property and lands. Instead, Luke reports Barnabas sold "a field," no mention of his house and other assets. If that's the case, Barnabas didn't totally divest himself of all his worldly goods. Even so, he was still lauded for being a "son of encouragement." Why's that? Perhaps Peter and the others realized that Barnabas' gift was a big first step for him. He gave all that he was able to give at that time and later as his trust in God increased so would his giving.

Apparently Ananias and Sapphira couldn't or wouldn't understand that God was pleased with Barnabas' gift even though it wasn't as generous as all the others. All they could see was that his standing increased within the faith community. They become envious. They wanted to be noticed too so they schemed to get praised.

Unfortunately for them, just the opposite happened. They were exposed for being posers. "You lied to the Holy Spirit," Peter charged. He then went on to remind Ananias that what he owned was his and he was in no way obligated to give even a penny to the church. There was no command, no expectation that anyone had to give anything.

That's when Ananias dropped dead. Speaking personally, I'd be more comfortable with this story if Ananias, and later Sapphira, were simply overcome with shame and embarrassment. Even so, there is a lesson to be learned here. All of us, myself included, have at least once in our lifetimes misrepresented ourselves for being more important than we are. If we got caught in the act, hopefully we were humbled and learned not to try it again.

Recently a journalist reported on the young third year resident who performed John Lennon's resuscitation after he was mortally wounded thirty-five years ago. He was so distraught at Lennon's death he turned down the Hospital Administrator's request to moderate the news conference to give the forensic report of the cause. So the head administrator of the hospital's emergency room went out and gave the news. In the decades that followed this same administrator told the New York Times, the AP and CNN that he performed the emergency procedures. His account was later contradicted by the emergency room attendants and the young resident who after thirty-five years broke his silence and set the record straight. As a result to his embarrassment the Hospital Administrator was forced to back pedal his claims.

Why did that doctor take credit for something he didn't do? That was Peter's question to Ananias. "Why did you lie?"

Why did Ananias misrepresent himself?

I'm not qualified to psychoanalyze Ananias but I can speculate about the flaws in his character: Were Ananias and his wife a couple of congenital posers? By that I mean was this a life pattern, were they always misrepresenting themselves to hoodwink their neighbors and business associates for personal gain? In short was Ananias a con man and Sapphira a con woman? If that's the case then they soon found out their dishonesty didn't fit in with God's Kingdom. Theirs is an extreme example of trying to put new wine in old wine skins. Their crooked ways were completely way out of step with Christ's emerging Kingdom, where the first will be last and the last will be first.

Again, this is not a passage to be used for a stewardship sermon but it is a morality tale teaching us to be authentic about who we really are. Otherwise we can never grow into our truest humanity. But there's another equally important reason: if we can't be honest with ourselves, how can we ever expect to be honest with God and each other?

Luke reports the Jerusalem church's immediate response to this incident. "And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard these things." It sounds like the church was paralyzed by terror with everybody thinking, "I better behave or God will zap me." Truth be told too many church leaders have used the fear factor to keep their flocks in line, a tactic that is in the long run counter-productive.

I believe a better way to word this verse would be, "And a great awe seized the church."

When you are awed by something or someone you are overwhelmed and bow down in submission. A perfect example would be Isaiah's vision of God in the temple.

"Woe is me!" Isaiah cried out, "I am a sinful man..."

Isaiah's awe of God came from realizing God is holy, totally above and beyond us. As C.S. Lewis put it, "to be in awe means you experience wonder and a certain shrinking...a sense of inadequacy to cope with a visitant (that leads to) prostration before it."

It isn't a fear that brings about despair, instead it's awe that leads to trust and ultimately grace. You are afraid but you're not afraid because you know that you are loved.

This feeling isn't something you can conjure up on your own but it is the proper response, already encoded in our DNA, to the glorious and mysterious Presence that created all things and keeps them in existence. Paradoxically, it is a healthy fear that frees you from anxiety and liberates your spirit. It is a helpful fear that protects your heart and draws your mind to truth when you're challenged by a pack of lies. You no longer worry about the future because you know God is already there waiting for you.

This fear of the Lord energized the church in Jerusalem and the people grew in faith, hope and love.

We live in a world with much to fear, the terrorist attack in Paris the other night is a stark reminder of that. But didn't Jesus say to his disciples countless times, "Do not be afraid for I have overcome the world"? Allowing yourself to be awed by God overcomes your fears, like the fear of having not enough, fearing the future, being afraid you'll be ignored, overlooked or left behind. It was those fears that drove Ananias and Sapphira to fear they weren't important enough in the eyes of the Apostles. So they pretended, they puffed themselves only to end up deflating themselves.

Come to think of it, this really is a stewardship sermon, being good and faithful stewards of yourselves by letting God's love liberate us from our self-imposed limitations and realizing we are God's beloved children, Jesus' beloved brothers and sisters and the Holy Spirit's beloved agents of transformation in the world. That's something awesome to think about.

Ananias and Sapphira just didn't get it. Thankfully the rest of the Jerusalem Church did get it and hopefully we get it too. We don't have to play the old game and misrepresent ourselves to God and each other. We can let God's love fill us with awe, transform our minds and hearts and help us to get real and stay real for the sake of Christ and his Kingdom and those who still need to hear the Good news and experience an awe of God.