

Sermon Ananias and Saphira

In my back pocket, for times that feel lighter than this present moment does, I have a sermon series in mind called weird and wacky stories of scripture. Included in it are the stories of men who drink like dogs, the talking donkey, the story of Jeremiah hiding his underwear in a rock, and the story of a man actually bored to death from Paul's preaching. You can probably guess, after seeing this particular weird and wacky story interpreted by the Wolff family (thank you by the way!) that today's text would definitely make the cut in the wild and wacky sermon series. I'm heartened that we are doing this story.

As you just saw, as the story goes, Ananias and Saphira lie, and don't give everything that they have to the church, so God strikes them down, dead. Can you imagine living in a world like that? Giving everything to the church, but when you hold some back, boom you're done for? Or perhaps it is the lie that they tell about saying they're giving everything and then not, that makes them fall down dead? Can you imagine?! It has all the makings of a tall tale, and isn't exactly typical of scripture stories.

Just before this in Acts, the apostles, entrusted to carrying on Jesus' ministry, are doing signs, miracles, wonders. It's amazing, incredible, that they are carrying on Jesus' ministry with such magnitude. They're getting in good trouble.¹ God's grace, healing, and power are present. And people are taken in, moved by the Spirit when they hear the stories about Jesus. They're inspired, so much so that they're joining the movement too. Whether or not it happened exactly that way, it's beautiful. People from all over are finding that they have much in common. They live together, are selling their belongings and giving the proceeds to anyone who had need among them. They're spending time, eating food together with "glad and generous hearts," Acts chapter 2 tells us, "praising God and having the goodwill of the people." And in Acts chapter 3, they're of one heart and one soul, no one claiming private ownership for any possessions. Everything was shared in common. It sounds amazing! It sounds like God's realm on earth, right?

But then, there's Ananias and Saphira. Everything seems mostly ideal in the community or at least that's how things are portrayed. Until we hear about this story. Where the previous stories could be titled, "how to live in community," this one could be titled, "how *not* to live in community." There were just examples in Acts of how good things can be, held up in contrast to Ananias and Saphira's story, which is what happens when people don't live into the trust, responsibility, and shared care of the community of faith. We saw from the video, that holding back, lying, and operating out of secret self-preservation has grave—pun intended—consequences.

You see, the early Judeo-Christians were trying to figure out how to live as a community. And there were some great things that came out of it. But Ananias and Saphira represent what happens when people, "one by one or two by two, choose self *over* community rather than self *in* community."² When one starts to do it, others are surely to follow and the beauty of the community starts diminishing. Eroding, slowly over time. Do you see what's going on in this

¹ Shout out to Civil Rights legend and Rep. John Lewis

² Mitzi J. Smith, *workingpreacher.org* commentary

story? It's like a tall tale, and a cautionary tall tale, like a Grimm's fairy tale, designed to shock, fascinate, or scare people into better behavior.

It's the beginning of stewardship season at first UCC, and I will absolutely not be scaring you into better behavior, nor will I be telling you that you need to sell everything you own and share it with the church (though we wouldn't complain if you did!) And yes, I'm talking stewardship, but before your eyes glaze over, lean in.

We are living in a time of incredible possibility. I know it seems like things are bad. Like the change is too much. And believe me, I know. It is *so* much. We are just past month 7 of a global pandemic and we've hit the proverbial wall when it comes to dealing with a crisis. Our bodies, minds, souls, and social lives are feeling weary with it all. We are living in a difficult and complex election cycle, one that is entirely consequential for all of our futures. We are dealing with crisis after crisis. And. And if we are honest, for better or worse, most of us have been given a rare opportunity to really look at our life and reevaluate things

Do you remember what we wondered about at the beginning of the pandemic? That though we can never underestimate or take away the horror or impact of this pandemic in the country—we wondered, early on—who do we want to be on the other side of this pandemic? What things did we do before that we are just fine letting go of? What other things do we want to do with renewed vigor and purpose when it's over? Do you hear God whispering anything to you in the midst of all of this?

Parents I know have talked about not missing the driving every which way to drop kids off at sports and events and all sorts of other activities. They've talked about actually having deeper relationships with their children, and slower lives again. Businesses and churches have talked about a long overdue technological jump that never would have happened without this time. Friends are talking about how cherished relationships are to them now, how extraordinary they are. There are things we are seeing for the first time clearly. Things we are waking up to personally, socially, systemically, and institutionally. Questions we are asking that have long needed to be asked: who are we, and who do we want to be? Where do we want to go? Or as Mary Oliver put it, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

We are asking ourselves questions right now at First UCC, too. We know *some* things about ourselves. We are a resilient congregation. A vibrant congregation, even in a pandemic. And we've been through some real transition, change, and loss. But First UCCers can handle nuance and are expansive. We can hold multiple feelings, multiple happenings at the same time. We are a spirited, passionate, justice-seeking, vigorous bunch. And, together we are listening for God's whisper through the work of the transition team, too: who are we now? Who do we want to be? Where is the pulse of our congregation, where is our shared heart beating now?

During stewardship season, we have the chance to take stock of what this community means to us, how it feeds us, nurtures us, challenges us in ways that keep us moving, that keep us growing. Others in the past have talked about being inspired by the generosity of the folks in this congregation. Their generosity—*your* generosity—shows faith in the ministries here, faith in our outward presence in Northfield. From supporting the CAC that was formed in the basement of this building, to taking bold steps ourselves on climate action, to welcoming immigrants, and now actively working on all of the ways to be anti-racist—in our hearts, in our

actions, and in dismantling it in the systems of our society. I believe in this community and in what we do. I'm inspired by what we can and are doing together. My family and I tithe our income back to our churches because we are inspired by them, because we believe in them; and we increase our giving every year.

If you can't do that, it's okay. It's okay if your financial situation is uncertain. You are valued here. If you are in a younger generation, so many these days are doing what we call a modern tithe. Millennials are the biggest generation of givers—did you know that? And they give to a wide variety of worthy causes. So if you are in that group of folks, if you see the intergenerational relationships here, if you see that the justice-seeking passion of the community here can make a real difference, if this community grounds or centers you, if you love the worship or the music, or you just like that you feel less alone when you come here and are welcomed *exactly* as you are—consider supporting what goes on here in this community regularly or increasing your support. It *is* a place where hope thrives.

I think we can trust that we are safe from what happened to Ananias and Saphira—and no one is asking you to give up everything you have—but giving as you can is an investment in hope, an investment in community, an investment in justice-making.

The ancient church in Acts was a place where hope thrived, and its true of us, today too. They were asking themselves the same questions we are asking today: who are we here, now? Who do we want to be? How do we want to live in the world—in this world with all of its tragedy and joy mixed together? How do we, here, now, live out God's realm? Can we even fathom what is possible, together, with God?

The other day I was listening to a video by Reverend M. Barclay, who wrote these words. I wonder if this could be what God's realm looks like, if this is the whisper of God speaking to us; what Ananias and Saphira sadly neglected to learn about living in community. I wonder if this is the whisper of God for the people. About the pandemic. About the election. About transition. About who we are and what's next. About what the realm of God looks like, and what it looks like in this congregation when we live out God's call to be Christ in the world. Rev. Barclay writes:

Individualism is destructive.
Send greed and selfishness away.
That learned refusal to acknowledge
Your own need for help—
Let it be gone as well.

When possible,
Counter all impulses toward privatized survival
With acts of love—collective and expansive—
With caring for others and accepting care.

Remember we need each other.
Remember the needs of your neighbors (literal and metaphorical).
Remember the vulnerable.
Remember we are in this together, even when we don't act like it.

People depend on your choices—
You depend on the choices of others.
This, a Sacred and terrible truth woven into our flesh.

So let this time be an opening
To all the sources of connection we have lost in this era of
Pushing-down,
Pushing-through,
Pushing-away,
And pushing-the-pace.

Let all that is soft, all that is slow, all that is gentle,
All that is kind, all that is care-ful,
Be welcome home in each of us.
We have such creative, powerful, generous and brave capacities within us.
We can choose to do things differently.”

Amen.³

³ Rev. M. Barclay, *enfleshed.com*