

A Generous Spirit (Part 2)
Sermon 186 | Greystone Baptist Church | June 4, 2023
Acts 5:1-11

For fourteen years - since the day I was ordained as a minister of the Gospel - I have avoided preaching this piece of scripture. The reasons should be fairly apparent if you were paying attention as Joanne read just now.

Throughout all of church history, the story of Ananias and Sapphira has evoked fear into the hearts of preachers, church-goers, and stewardship committee chair-persons alike, leading some to suggest that

(a) the expectations stated in the book of Acts around the generosity in the early church are not descriptions of a reality but rather an ideal that has never really been accomplished. Or,

(b) that the practice of such radical generosity was so unrealistic, so unsustainable that it only lasted for a couple of weeks, months at best, and did not characterize the majority of the earliest Christian communities.

Some would argue that these lesser interpretations diminish the meaning of the text and hide it away behind our own insecurities around stewardship and generosity. As an interpreter and more specifically as a preacher though, my job is not to “take the sting out of the text,” but to deal with it directly, “to clarify it and to bring it to bear on our current situation.”¹

Though the story of Ananias and Sapphira is widely known and widely avoided, its context within the book of Acts is widely ignored. After the Holy Spirit appeared at Pentecost and animated the disciples with the ability to speak new languages, the movement came under public scrutiny. Nobody knew quite what to do with this group of Jesus followers who were growing in number daily.

The way Luke tells the story, the disciples prayed for courage in the face of this scrutiny, and when they prayed, “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness,” (Acts 4:31). But speaking with boldness was not enough, for the saying is true: talk is cheap! The whole group - more than five thousand believers at this point - had begun living as a family, a beloved community - *koinonia*, in the Greek. And in this kind of holy community, the relationships are so strong that community needs transcended individual needs. The church was the primary community and the community was the first priority. After describing the culture of generosity in the early church, one that ensured no one had any need, because everyone was taken care of by the community.

¹ Gonzalez, 77.

Luke gives us two examples. First, was Joseph, whom the apostles renamed Barnabas (meaning son of encouragement). Barnabas sold a field that was his and gave all the money to the church. I wonder whether he got his new name before or after this incredible act of generosity.

The second example is that of Ananias and Sapphira who, like Barnabas, also sell some land. Only they kept a portion of the profit for themselves and failed to mention that in the presentation of their offering. Maybe they were newlyweds, or early in their careers and didn't feel like their offering would make much difference. Maybe they were just starting out and the field was all they had - what would they live on once this sole property was no longer theirs? Maybe they had a bunch of kids and some of them were enrolled in college. Maybe they were getting closer to retirement and were worried they might outlive their savings. Maybe they worried that their gift was so rich that it might surpass the gifts of others, making the church become overly dependent upon them. Or maybe they just wanted to enjoy the fruits of their labor and felt the sizable portion they presented to the apostles was enough.

Whatever their reasoning may have been, their words and their deeds did not match up. They had joined their community in praying for boldness, but when the opportunity came for them to practice what they'd been praying for, their actions fell a bit short.

"Ananias and Sapphira lied to the [church and thus lied to the] Holy Spirit, and they paid for it with their lives." This makes us all uncomfortable as we consider our own relationship with money and generosity.

But in the words of New Testament scholar, Justo Gonzales, the lesson to be learned here is that,

"God is not to be trifled with. And because God is a serious matter, God's Church must also be a serious matter. One cannot 'play church' like children who 'play doctor.' To lie to the church is to lie to God. To say that all we have is God's and then to deny it to our brothers and sisters in need is to mock God. The price in the case of Ananias and Sapphira was physical death. The price in our case may be even greater: spiritual death."

See why so many of us like to avoid this text?! Maybe we feel like we don't have much, if anything, to give. Maybe we are worried about the future and are holding on to see what happens. Maybe we have already given and feel like it is time for someone else to pick up the mantle and share the load. Maybe we remember Ananias and Sapphira and how they held a little back for themselves and we know that we would have done the same thing. In fact, we know that we do the same thing. It takes money to pay our bills, it takes money to care for our families, and it takes money just to live. It would be irresponsible just to sell everything and give it all away!

But here's the thing: that is not what this story is about.

The problem with Ananias and Sapphira was not that they retained property or profit for themselves. The problem was that they did so in a spirit of dishonesty. They were 'playing church' like children who 'play doctor'. ...refusing to allow the generous Spirit of Pentecost to cultivate a generous spirit within them. And God desires a spirit of generosity. God desires a spirit of generosity characteristic of the generous Spirit that flew open the doors of that Pentecost room and was so radically abundant that it filled the streets as well.

You see even though the story of Ananias and Sapphira is a story about money, it is also about the mission of the early church. The people gave generously in the church because the mission of the church was to be a lived expression of the kingdom of God.

If in God's kingdom, the last are first, then in the church the last are first.

If in God's kingdom, grief and pain are shared, then in the church pain and grief are shared.

So if in God's kingdom, love abounds, then in the church love abounds.

If in God's kingdom, the people are generous, then in the church the people are generous.

It doesn't matter what the kingdoms of this world say about money, about status, about love, what matters is that those who profess with their mouths that they are followers of Jesus learn the language of God's kingdom and live it with their whole lives, The mission of the church is to be a lived expression of God's kingdom. So when we go to church we learn to speak the languages of God which are the Fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and yes... generosity too!

We learn those languages here, at church as we speak them with one another and eventually, we become fluent and once that happens... Whether we are in the church or outside, we can't help but to speak them because they become second nature to us.

What if love or kindness or generosity became our native language?

We come to this place, this church, this community to learn the language of God so that we can begin to speak the language of God with our mouths and also with our lives, so that we might be loving people, sharing people, generous people full of a radically Generous Spirit. And we cannot learn to speak this language if we are not willing to practice it here - with this community of fellow learners. We cannot claim to be led by the Generous Spirit if we do not allow that Spirit to create a generous spirit within us. And we cannot expect to have a generous spirit within us if we do not practice the language of generosity here, in this place. You see generosity is not for the church; generosity is for us. We give to God, to the church, so that we might practice the language of generosity. So that we might become more generous people. So that we might better embody the Generous Spirit of God in this world.

That was the mission of the early church and that is the mission of Christ's church today. To be a living example of the Kingdom of God... the Kingdom of Heaven.

When I think about our church specifically, so many names and faces come to mind where generosity is concerned. But none more so than Eileen Trawick. Eileen was a founding member of this congregation and she gave her whole self to its success as a mission to the people living in Northwest Raleigh.

After Eileen passed away, her son told me a story about the early days and a meeting the founders had when signing the loan to buy the property and build the first buildings here. When she signed her name on the loan note, she was committing with her word, her promise, that this church would be a priority for her, that it would be her spiritual home, a training ground where she would come to learn and practice the language of God's kingdom and where God would cultivate within her a generous spirit.

But when she left the meeting, the one where she signed her name on the line, Eileen did something special... she immediately went out and started applying for jobs.

Now Eileen was already working overtime raising her 5 sons, but she knew that if she was going to SAY she was all in, she wanted to really BE all in. She had to do her part, and in order to do that, she needed to get a paying job. Eileen was a Barnabas among us. Someone within whom a generous spirit was born and nurtured and was allowed to grow and grow and grow. That is what happens when God's Generous Spirit lives in us...

We all become a little more generous and as we do, we soon discover that we have more than we could ever imagine, more than we could ever need, right here, right now.

A living example of the Kingdom of God. A kingdom of abundance, a kingdom of generosity. So we don't have to be afraid as we remember the early church and the stories of those who brought their offerings before God. We do not need to avoid these ancient stories... But we do have to take their questions seriously... Have we been honest with God, with our church, with our community, about what we have? And have we allowed the generous Spirit of God to create a generous spirit within us?

Let us pray:

O Lord, you know our hearts better than we know them ourselves.
You have poured out your generous Spirit around us and within us giving us all that we need to live in Christian community with one another.
Give us the courage to give generously,
And as we give, create within us a generous spirit that just keeps on growing,
so that your kingdom may come,
your will may be done
on earth,
in Raleigh, NC
in Greystone Baptist Church
just as it is in heaven.
Amen.