



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
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They Tried. They Lied. They Died.

Acts 5:1-10

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The story of Ananias and his wife Sapphira is not one of the most well known stories in the Bible.

Acts 4 ends by telling us that as the need arose, people would sell the property and put the money at the apostles' feet to be used to care for everyone, especially those in need.

Ananias sold a piece of property with his wife's full knowledge he keeps part of the money back and puts the rest at the apostles' feet. In the process of this, however, he stated and let it be known that he was giving everything he had received for the property.

Peter, however, calls him on it and tells Ananias that he wasn't really stealing from people, but he was, in fact, stealing from God.

Ananias, caught up in a lie, caught up in shame, simply drops dead.

Later on, unaware of what had transpired earlier, his wife, Sapphira shows up and Peter asks her if, indeed the money brought forward by them was all the money they had received. Sapphira claims it is and Peter calls her on it and says these remarkable words:

"Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

Sapphira is gripped with fear and she also drops dead.

And Luke, I love Luke with his little almost throwaway lines, says in a very wry manner, *"Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events."*

No kidding.

Ananias and Sapphira. They tried. They lied. They died.

This is a strange story. Ananias and Sapphira make a pledge to the church, don't fulfill

the pledge, lie about it, and when they are called on it, drop dead.

I went to a preaching conference in Atlanta this past Spring. Peter Gomes, the Dean of the Chapel at Harvard University, joked about this passage. He thought it would take an incredibly bold preacher to preach this story on Stewardship Sunday. You can't fulfill your pledge. *"The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."*

Imagine a Stewardship Campaign based on this one. They tried. They lied. They died. Our church budget had a surplus of \$500,000.00 this year! Some congregational fatalities helped the giving process along. Don Corleone, Tony Soprano, and Jerry Falwell would be proud!

And, of course, Luke tells us, 'great fear seized the whole church.'

I have a warped sense of humor and, frankly, I think that this story has a humorous edge to it. It's an almost funny story to tell because we know that a lot of people have made pledges to God over the years, a lot of people haven't fulfilled those pledges, and we all know that they are stricken down.

But what if we look at that which is serious in this story because there is a lot there. The story, in its own way is entertaining, it's a bit funny in a morbid warped kind of way, but it also begins to broach on an uncomfortable subject. God and money.

Jesus spoke about two topics most of the time. One topic was how people treated each other. The other topic was money. Those were the focus of most of what Jesus had to say.

And this story touches on the topic of money.

Ananias and Sapphira made a commitment, couldn't quite give up everything they had committed to, lied about it, and died.

They couldn't quite give up their money. They couldn't let go.

Money, how we deal with money, often gives us the clearest insight into our souls. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart is also." There also is your checking account. There also is your wallet. What we spend our money on and how we use money speaks a lot about our souls.

The first issue with money is that we have to determine, in our lives, if we own our money or if our money owns us. Do we own what we possess or does what we possess own us?

This is not a trick question.

We all recall the story of the rich young man who wants to follow Jesus. What makes him so different from the other apostles is that this young man has great answers to all of Jesus' questions. This guy actually has a clue. But when Jesus tells him that he must sell everything he had before following Jesus, the man sulks away.

Jesus had an insight into this young man that the young man didn't have about himself. Jesus knew that this young man was owned by his property. The only way he could ever be truly free in life was to give up his property and, once freed from it, then, and only then, could he truly follow Jesus.

We've all heard stories, however, more in our own day and age when people were owned by their property.

People are robbed with the words, "your money or your life," and they are murdered over a small amount of money. No matter how little or great they had, they couldn't give it up and it cost them their lives.

Or we've read news stories about people who are tragically killed in fires because they ran back into the house to rescue Mom's silver set. We can understand it when they want to rescue their children, but a silver set?

But the reason is the same. They are owned by their possessions.

And that is the problem with Annanias and Sapphira in this story. They had no needs. We are told that everyone's needs were being met. They were not asked to do anything differently from anyone else. But they just couldn't do it. What they owned had too much of a pull that they ended up dying because they just couldn't let go.

It was an issue of allowing what they possessed to possess them.

The second issue with money that often gets people in trouble is grappling with the issue of money and power.

Money has worldly power.

People who aspire to high political office cannot do so unless they have or are able to raise large sums of money. There are many people in public office who won elections because they were able to pay their way and purchase their own ads, etc.

In the world of business, the largest, most successful businesses have the most money and they are able to use that money to make more money.

Money, in the world, often translates into power.

Even in churches.

In churches decisions are often made on how much something is going to cost and how we are going to get the money. Interestingly enough, if someone gives a great deal of money for a certain project to be done or a decision to be made, it often is. So money even influences life in the church.

In our world, money often equals power. So to have money is often to have power; and to not have money is to be powerless. So money becomes crucial.

In recent years there has been a trend in some churches to preach what is often called “The Prosperity Gospel.” The current issue of *Time* has a lead story on this. It’s a kind of name it and claim it mentality towards the Gospel. Its central doctrine is that health and prosperity are promised to all believers, and are available through faith. If you want to have a lot of money and want to be rich and have faith, you will be rich; and if you don’t become rich it’s because you didn’t have enough faith.

It essentially is based on the premise that if I pray for a pony I’ll get a pony.

Which means all the very poor, very faithful people in Christianity were not nearly as faithful as we were led to believe according to this premise.

Sort of negates the story of the Widow’s Mite.

Those who push this Gospel, many of them quite famous and rich preachers, state that this is a Biblical premise....but....

If you read their citations, they quote a lot of random passages out of context to back up their opinions. This often passes, these days, for being “Biblical” but it’s also incredibly dishonest.

Some years ago a Roman Catholic Theologian named Monika Hellwig wrote an article that was breathtaking in its scope and one of the most quoted articles I have ever encountered. Hellwig, who actually was Biblical said that God actually has a preferential option towards the power because the poor have more advantages in approaching God than people who are wealthy do. Her list is remarkable:

1. The poor know they are in urgent need of redemption.
2. The poor know not only their dependence on God and on powerful people but also their interdependence with one another.
3. The poor rest their security not on things but on people.

4. The poor have no exaggerated sense of their own importance, and no exaggerated need of privacy.
5. The poor expect little from competition and much from cooperation.
6. The poor can distinguish between necessities and luxuries.
7. The poor can wait, because they have acquired a kind of dogged patience born of acknowledged dependence.
8. The fears of the poor are more realistic and less exaggerated, because they already know that one can survive great suffering and want.
9. When the poor have the Gospel preached to them, it sounds like good news and not like a threat or a scolding.
10. The poor can respond to the call of the Gospel with a certain abandonment and uncomplicated totality because they have so little to lose and are ready for anything.

In summary, through no choice of their own—they may urgently wish otherwise—poor people find themselves in a posture that befits the grace of God. In their state of neediness, dependence, and dissatisfaction with life, they may welcome God’s free gift of love.¹

The problem, she surmised, with being wealthy, was that when we have a lot of money we attain a lot of earthly power and feel and act like we need God less. Jesus says, in the Beatitudes in Luke which we rarely read and many people do not even realize exist, not “Blessed are the poor in Spirit,” as Matthew does, but Luke’s version is much more blunt: “Blessed are the poor.”

If you are a believer in the Prosperity Gospel, just reread this story and ask Ananias and Sapphira and see how well it worked for them.

The story of Ananias and his wife Sapphira might not be the best known story in the Bible, but it is a story of compelling interest which forces us to deal and confront certain questions on how we approach money.

Do we own money or does our money own us?

And do we use money to attain power and fulfill personal ambition and how often do we risk losing sight of God? Difficult questions, we are forced to face by this obscure tale.

¹Christianity Today, November 13, 1995, p. 52