

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Giving”
The Resurrection Community, series.
5th Sunday of Easter
Acts 4:32-5:11
April 24, 2016

You all sounded a little too enthusiastic about your “**Thanks be to God**” after that reading, if you ask me. Unless you’re just really the vengeful type, I guess. I mean, maybe somebody in here was thinking, “**Thanks be to God. They got what they had coming to them.**”

After all, we do all know how the greed of a few can destroy the lives of the many. That’s what the Great Recession we just lived through was all about, right? Greedy bankers, selling bad loans, and then betting against them... And who are the ones hurt along the way when the house of cards falls apart?

We’ve all heard the stories: millions loose their home,
and others loose equity in their homes...
and then loose their jobs,
and the cycle continues
while the whole system implodes on itself...
and before long people are also loosing their families,
and probably their hope and their self-worth and their lives.

All the while, the bankers and Wall Street executives are given massive bonuses with American taxpayer bail out money.

The story is pretty outrageous, but it’s what happened. So if Ananias and Sapphira were the ones that pushed the first dominoes over in the collapse that not only destroyed our economy, but destroyed families, and destroyed lives... then maybe it’s a lot easier for us to say, “Thanks be to God” for this story of sudden and divine justice. Maybe.

I mean, if you pulled out the names **Ananias and Sapphira** and put in the name **Bernie Madoff...** would it change how you feel about the ending here? I’m willing to bet it would... at least a little. On some level we’d think they got what was coming to them. They were reaping what they were sowing.

But this story... Ananias and Sapphira’s story... well, it’s not so clear cut is it? As someone pointed out in our Wed Lunch, the ethics of how we “get” our money, how we “make” money are pretty clear. But the ethics around how we give?

Not so much.

Remember, Ananias and Sapphira are part of this church where all the upper class in the church, all the wealthy landowners, are selling their property and giving the proceeds to the apostles for the sake of the church... to make sure no one is in need. It’s

this *shocking and beautiful thing that is going on in the life of the church*. Next thing they know, their friend Barnabas, who sits in the pew next to them every Sunday, joins in this crazy generosity. And now... there's this pressure for them to join in too.

But Ananias and Sapphira aren't so sure. So, they concoct a little plan. It's harmless really. They sell their property. And give... well, we don't know how much they gave, but let's say they give half of it to the church. The other half, they put away in their investment portfolio.

It's still an amazing act of generosity, isn't it? And maybe it could have been seen that way... if they hadn't tried to hide the truth of the matter.

But they do.

And they are struck down dead. **"Thanks be to God?"**

It's a hard story.

It's an uncomfortable story.

And it's a problematic story... because it's really all too easy to use this story for spiritual abuse. I mean, it's not hard to come up with the moral of the story is here. And it sure seems like it's a moral that is all about guiltting you into giving more. That's the easiest thing in the world to do with this story, isn't it? You don't have to go to seminary to come up with the sermon title for it, or be that creative to come up with the saying on the church marquee, do you?

"Give it all away, or God's going to get you."

"Sell your property or sell your soul?"

Or if you're the creative type: **"Giving: The Church's Life Insurance Policy."**

It's certainly one way of reading the story, isn't it?

But what if the stories in scripture aren't there to teach us a little moral... nice or otherwise.

What if the bible isn't just a collection of stories and teachings that are there to give us advise.

What if instead of reading the scriptures and drawing a conclusion, we're supposed to allow the scriptures to read us?

Well, that changes everything. Suddenly this isn't a story with a moral or advise in it that I can use in my life. Now this is telling me the story that's already true in my life. In other words, it's not a story for us. It's a story about us.

It's the same idea that Shakespeare uses in his play *Hamlet*. I know it's been along time since you've read *Hamlet*, unless you're Chuck Hussung. So, let me just remind you.

Hamlet's father was the dead king. His uncle Claudius is the new King, and Hamlet suspects his uncle of murdering his father just so he could get the throne. But Hamlet needs proof. It's not like you can just go around accusing the King of murder.

A traveling play shows up and is going to perform in the King's court. Remember, there were no movies back then. No TV shows. So watching a play was one of the most powerful ways that people experienced stories.

And it's not like it was an everyday occurrence. The King couldn't just pull up a play on Netflix when he was bored. It was special. And it could be powerful.

So, Hamlet sneaks a few lines into the play that are so pointed at the King that, if he is the murderer, it should make the King flinch. If the King is guilty, he will have some strong reaction to show it, because... suddenly the King won't just be watching a play, a story. Now the Story is watching him... it's telling his story.

And so Hamlet says to himself, **“the play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King”**

And it works.

Hamlet catches Claudius red-handed...

or red-faced so to speak.

The same thing happens when the scriptures begin to read us. Some awareness with us opens up, and suddenly we realize... this isn't just some story with a nice moral to it. The scriptures aren't here to give me advice. The scriptures are so potent because they are they are telling me my story. This is about me... it is about us.

So, for example, take the story at the beginning of Genesis, where Adam and Eve are in the garden and they have all they need, and they are **surrounded by life and beauty and goodness**.

But then skepticism slithers its way into their life. And prideful possibility. And the lies it tells and the promises it holds looks so good... that Adam and Eve take the forbidden fruit... and eat it. And when they do, everything else that already was theirs, is poisoned.

When we start to let the scriptures read us, then we start to realize this isn't just some story about how sin first entered into the world. This is a story about us... about me. It's the story of my life... of every time the beauty and goodness given to me wasn't quite enough for me... and I listened to the lies that slithered their way into my world. And it's the story of how I want to blame anyone and everyone, including God, for the mess that I've created.

You see, when we let the scriptures begin to read us...

and when you begin to see that this story is really your story...

that's when you finally begin to see the God honest truth about your life,

and ***that's when the scriptures become God's inspired word to us***

And certainly that is true in the book of Acts. We're reading the story of the Resurrection Community, because it's telling us our story... here and now.

And one of the striking parts of this story is the amazing movement toward generosity that's happening in the Resurrection Community. From the very beginning, the people of the resurrection are experiencing the resurrection in all areas of their life... including in their finances.

And so generosity and giving plays this really significant role in the story... as it should. We all know what a powerful force money is in our lives, right? We've seen it and we've felt it along the way.

In our Lectionary Lunch on Wednesday we were talking about the ways in which money can shape our relationships. It's a power in-and-of itself. It's this force acting upon our friendships. It acting upon our family relationships, and yes, even upon our church.

You've probably experienced what happens when you and a close friend, or a sibling who were once in the same economic reality, suddenly have very different financial positions. It changes things. A new reality exists in your relationship. It's this power that can create resentment or guilt. Jealousy or pride. It doesn't have to be a negative thing... but even if it's not, money has a powerful presence to it. It's radioactive in that way. It works on anything and everyone in relation to it.

It's why we don't like talking about our money...

how much we have or don't have...

how much we make or how much we give.

Because we know that all these things have a powerful dynamic to them that we can't completely control, but can dramatically affect our relationships... and can even affect the condition of our souls.

And that power isn't really based on how much you do or don't have. It's just there for all of us.

Rich and poor alike, if we're honest, we all wish we were making just a little bit more.

Rich and poor alike, we probably all feel guilty at times about not giving just a little bit more than we are.

Rich and poor alike, we've all have these fears about wealth...

Rich and poor alike, we all have a propensity to judge one another... or to be afraid of being judged.

Rich and poor alike, money is a power in our lives that has the potential to corrupt us...

... and eat away at us,

... and turn us into a kind of walking dead, where we live trapped in tombs of one kind or another that are created by the power of money at work in our lives.

And so, one of the striking characteristics of the resurrection community is a profound generosity. ***In the resurrection community, the power of money is conquered by the power of Life.***

It's the story we read in Acts 2 and again today in Acts 4, when we see people in the church selling their land, and giving the money to the church, so that no one had any need.

And if you're reading the story well, you know that this is also our story. It's been at work among you and in you... every time your impulse toward fear and your impulse toward security, and your impulse toward greed... has been usurped by your great acts of generosity... that are so beautiful and profound: That is Resurrection Life at work in you.

I've seen it happen here countless times. Yes, it happened last fall in our capital campaign, but that's not all. It's happened in your care for one another and it's happened in your generosity toward the world.

It's one more way I've seen the evidence of the Resurrected One in our midst. Time and time again.

But it doesn't always happen does it? And the bible is honest enough to tell us that story too... the uncomfortable story about ourselves that we'd rather not talk about.

If you let Acts read you then you know that sometimes you've been Barnabas in this story. I **know you have**. And sometimes you've been Ananias and Sapphira in this story. I **know I have**...

And let me just tell you that this story may sound harsh, but it's a story that is telling the truth. Because every time **I've been Ananias**... I have experienced a deep and profound and unexpected death. That's just what happens when you're **Ananias**.

But in those few instances... when by God's grace, I've had the courage **to be Barnabas**... I've have experienced resurrection.

You see, ***giving is a resurrection act***. It is a movement from selfishness and protectionism... to participating in God's love of the world. And when you participate in God's life that way, you too are made alive. That's why giving and generosity is a mark of the resurrection community.

I grew up hearing and being taught that you should give until it hurts. If it doesn't hurt, then it's not sacrificial, and if it's not sacrificial then you're not really practicing generosity. And I think there is some truth in that. But I also think it misses the point in a profound way. The point of generosity isn't to hurt enough to prove your allegiance to the church or to prove your allegiance to God. In fact, that is what Ananias and Sapphira's motivation seem to be.

The point isn't to give just until it hurts.

The point is to give sacrificially...until it heals you...

to give... until you are resurrected from the tomb that money's power has over
you.

Dayspring, this is our story.
We are Barnabas.
We are Ananias and Sapphira
We are the community of the Resurrected One.

This is the honest,
 life-giving,
 truth-telling
“Word of the Lord for God's people.”
Thanks be to God.

Reflection

*“The power which broke the bonds of death on Easter,
 shattered the divisions of speech at Pentecost,
 and empowered one who was lame,
now releases the tight grip of private property.” ~William Willimon*