

MONEY JOY:

Let's Be Honest.

Proverbs 3:13-16; Acts 5:1-6

OGDEN DUNES COMMUNITY CHURCH

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A Sparkling Early Chapter

Sometimes, when a new congregation is planted, and becomes “the new church thing in town,” everyone is raving about how perfect everything is. Worship is amazing, sermon always great, music is superb, youth outreach is exploding.

The Acts of the Apostles, which was written by the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke, tells us about the birth and early childhood of the church.

When you look at the opening chapters of the life of the Christian community, it's pretty amazing. And it may make us feel the church we're a part of isn't even close to measuring up!

In Acts 2:42 and following, we're told “the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers.”

Life is so amazing in that early Christian community, there is such a sense of joy and unity and purpose and generosity, we're told “A sense of awe came over everyone.”

Verse 44 says the early Jesus followers “were united and shared everything.” Isn't that something to hear, to dream about, in a time when politics divide us and even churches split over all sorts of things?

And that early Christian community was growing. People were hungry for God, they were hungry for real community, they were hungry for truth, and the early Christian community was growing. New member classes were full to overflowing. They kept having to roll up the carpeting and knock down walls to handle the crowds.

Things were so good in that chapter of the life of the Christian community that we may find ourselves feeling a little down about the congregation here. Our life here at Ogden Dunes Community Church doesn't sparkle quite as brightly as the picture of the church we see in the opening chapters of Acts.

The Pretenders

The picture of the early church just sparkles, and then we get to chapter 5 of Acts. What you find there is the story that was read this morning a few moments ago. A man named Ananias, and his wife, Sapphira, have sold a piece of property.

While not stated explicitly in the account we find in Acts 5, they must have told the church that they were going to donate to the church every dollar they made on the sale of the land. They don't do that, though. Together, the wife and husband agree to keep back a portion of the proceeds from the sale.

We don't know why they decide to hold onto some of the money. Maybe it was for a good cause. Maybe it was to help a grandchild through college or maybe it was to buy health insurance. Or maybe it was money for something a little less altruistic: a week in the Turks & Caicos, a major upgrade of their kitchen and dining room.

They volunteer the gift.

They say they want to give all the money they make to this amazing thing that God is doing.

That sort of thing happens, you know? People surprise pastors and lay leaders with unexpected gifts. Someone has been blessed, and they can't wait to bless someone else with the money. They want to put the money to work.

People alive with the Spirit of God are eager to give...delighted to give...passionate about giving. *Where have you seen that? When have you felt that kind of joy at handing over a gift to God and something God wants done?*

Ananias presents the check from the sale of the land to the Session, I imagine. They're meeting up in the Fish Room. It's a big moment.

The moderator from the Presbytery is there, presiding, and she says, "You said you were going to give all of the money to God's work. How is it that Satan got hold of you and you have held back some of the proceeds from the sale of the land? It was your land and you could do anything with the money you wanted, but you made this big deal about loving God so much that you wanted to give all the money to this work. You've not only lied to the members of this community but you have lied to God!"

The truth can be a wonderful thing. And sometimes the truth is more than we can bear.

Shocked by the truth, stunned that his deception has been made public, Ananias drops over dead.

Young men struggle to carry the body up the street, to the fire station, and place it gently by the front door..

Sapphira shows up three hours later. *(It's a long meeting...so the Session meeting must have morphed into a meeting of the Pulpit Nominating Committee.)* The moderator, who is reviewing the search process and talking about clergy supply, asks Ananias, "Tell me, did you and your husband give all the proceeds from the sale of the land to the church?"

The woman says, "Yep. To the penny."

The moderator, who may need to learn a thing or two about pastoral tact, says, "How could you scheme with each other to challenge the Lord's Spirit? Your husband just dropped over dead and has been carried up the street to the fire station. And they're going to carry you out when you drop over dead, too."

Sapphira toppled over. She is carried out of the building.

"Trepidation and dread seized the whole church," Acts 5:11 says, "and all who heard what had happened." *(That suggests to me that just perhaps Ananias and*

Sapphira weren't the only ones in the church playing a game of pretend in their giving life. I'd sort of be curious what the next week's offering looked like you, wouldn't you?)

Why This Story?

So, tell me, why is this story included in Luke's account of the birth and life of the early church?

Antidote to Discouragement

Maybe Luke includes this in the book of Acts so we won't get overly discouraged when people in the church act like...well, people. It could be that Luke understood the good news about the Jerusalem church might wear us down...when we compare that to the reality of the place where we gather with others for worship or Bible study or a 12-step group.

Pastors have told me that they sometimes have people in their church come back from visits to other churches and say, "You know, they have it all figured out up there at Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility. The choir sings like angels, the preacher looks like George Clooney, the sermons are only 18 minutes long, and the donuts are from Calumet Bakery."

So maybe Luke includes the story to keep from getting discouraged because the people in our place act like...well...people. Even then, when the early Christian church still had that "new church smell," things weren't perfect. People weren't perfect. The New Testament has this amazing way of being honest: of telling it like it is! Luke doesn't "photo shop" the picture of the early church to cover up the blemishes.

Deal with It

Perhaps Luke puts this in his story of the church to encourage pastors and preachers to deal with the whole issue of faith and money. Jesus talked about money and possessions more than any other subject other than the Kingdom of God.

In fact, in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6) Jesus keeps coming back to our handling of money and how our concern about having stuff gets in the way of our soul life...our relationship with God. The Carpenter is talking about how making a show of our faith, and then he ends up talking about the things we value most. Jesus calls them "treasures."

Then, in verse 21, he says, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." It's a powerful insight into human nature: where we invest our money, where our money goes, will reveal what matters most to us. Look at your checkbook. Look at where you used your credit card or debit card. What you see there will say a lot about the state of your soul...your heart... your relationship with God!

Follow the money and you'll discover what matters most to you.

I suppose Luke may have included the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 as a way of encouraging pastors and preachers to step up and find the courage to address this core spiritual issue. Luke understood, I suspect, that this was going to be tough for preachers to do.

Preachers, pastors, and priests would rather talk about almost anything than talk about money.

Jesus knows, when he talks about possessions and anxiety and worry during the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew) or the Sermon on the Plain (Luke), this is an area of life that is key to living well...the abundant life.

Those who serve faith congregations are soul doctors. If they care about the people they serve, they will talk about the things that matter. If they love the people God loves, they will warn them about the things that are dangerous...and point them towards life...joy.

Some of you have heard me talk about Munster Donuts. I do that because I want you to know the joy of Munster Donuts. Some of you have heard me talk about the beach. I tell people from other parts of the country about the Indiana Dunes and beaches of Western Michigan: I want them to experience that joy.

Many of you know what I've discovered: being honest with God, and being faithful in our giving, brings all kind of joy into our lives.

Maybe the story of Sapphira and Ananias is included in Acts to encourage timid preachers to be bold enough, love enough, to talk about how our attachment to money...can starve the soul and put us in a cocoon of selfishness. You'll never really know the adventure of being free, of being alive, of experiencing the whole Jesus adventure, until love and gratitude takes control of your giving life.

A God Who Is Interested in Real

Here's the thing, though: I hunch this story has been given to us as a reminder that God is interested in real...not pretend. Not just when it comes to how we handle our possessions, our money, and give, but in who we are...and in our relationship with God. God is into real.

Money can wreck our relationship with God, drain the life out of our soul, keep us from living full and free, but beyond that God is interested in real with us...and not a game of pretend.

Amy Frylholm talks about how she has spent most her life not joining churches. She has floated from place to place, worshipping here and there, but not joining. She loved the Presbyterians for organizing the CROP walk and the Orthodox for their incense and burnt wax and the Methodists for a particular preacher and the Catholics for their beautiful liturgy. Eventually, though, she decided to join St. George Episcopal Church in Leadville, Colorado.

The Bishop arrived one Sunday to meet with the adult confirmation class. One by one, people around the circle told what part of the texts for the Easter liturgy meant the most to them. They told why they had decided to join the church.

The first person to speak was Floyd. He sat on his metal folding chair, white beard and overalls, hands in his pockets, nervously jingling his keys. He eyes were bright blue. His life had been defined by a mental breakdown he had suffered during the Vietnam War. He fixed cars and lived quietly, eating breakfast at the Golden Burrito and going to a local mental health center for anti-depressants.

“Well,” he told the bishop, “I picked Genesis 1, the story of creation. Before I came to this church, I was formless and void. Darkness was all around me. Then God moved over my waters, and there was light.”

Linda was next. She had come to the church for the first time through the community meals held at St. George. Linda had all kinds of anger issues. Linda told the bishop, “I chose Psalm 122, especially the part where it says, ‘May there be peace in your towers,’ because that is what I need. Peace in my towers. I never knew that an old book like that one could say exactly what was inside me.”

People in the room, after everyone had spoken, renewed their baptismal vows. They committed themselves to resisting evil, seeking and serving Christ.

Community where people can be honest...and loved. Our giving helps that kind of miracle happen. And being honest about our money and giving establishes a foundation for a community that is about real...about life...and not just pretend.

Right now we are in conversations about the future of our congregation. I am hopeful about our future. But so much of the new life ahead of us depends on our faithful giving in the now! Our giving makes new things, good things, possible!

God’s grace calls us to a life where our love for God, and our concern for the world, controls our giving...rather than our love for money limiting our relationship with God.

Maybe, as we have this conversation about the real stuff of life, our money and possessions, the Holy Spirit is tugging at us to be honest and open with God in a new kind of way.

A story.

I need to tell you a Money Joy story since that is what this series of messages is all about.

You’ve heard me talk about my Grandpa and Grandma Owen. They gave my Mom, my brother, and me a place to live after my Dad died in Africa. We moved back to Indy. They gave us their bedroom in the small house on Leland Avenue.

God blessed me there.

I can't tell you what it meant to me to live there for two years. I was loved there. I was given the space and love I needed to heal after the loss of my Dad.

You've heard stories. When I was playing with my toy trucks in my Grandma Zenith's precious flower bed, someone went to get here. She came outside, stood on the porch, looked down and said, "That little boy needs his highways more than I need my flower bed."

My Grandpa and I would go a nearby Dairy Queen, by a Marsh supermarket, and get things to take home on warm summer nights. We would stand outside the small DQ and wait, with bugs hitting that small zipper so there was an electric buzzing sound.

They so loved me. They were so generous to me...and my Mom...and my brother, Eric.

When she remarried, and my brother and I were adopted, we moved away. To Brussels. To the Congo. And we kept moving. To Alaska. And back.

After I had gotten out of IU, gotten married, and had a little boy, I went back to Indy for a visit. It was a Saturday morning. We went to a Bob Evan's restaurant just east of 465. All my life they had picked up the check. But on that morning, after breakfast, when the check was brought to the table, I picked it up.

I'm sure it wasn't much. The bill, I mean. But do you know the joy I felt in that moment was so extraordinary. Even now, I remember thinking as I held the check, "Thank you. Thank you for giving me a place. Thank you letting me build highways in your flower garden. Thank you for letting me hang out in your kitchen, and for letting me follow you around at the State House at work. Thank you for cackling and laughing when we would drive down the road, Grandpa, as you squeezed my knees. Thank you...for it all." I thought of all of that, and so much, in this small moment when I carried the bill to the register. It was my chance to give back. Giving was my way of responding to love received.

And it was all joy!