



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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OCTOBER 21, 2018
THE TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Covenant . . . Not Coercion
Mark 10:35-45; Acts 4:32-5:11

Wow! That story will preach, won't it? I could just say "Amen!", sing the hymn, pronounce the benediction, and we could go home early because the message of this story is pretty clear, isn't it? Doesn't this story about Ananias and Sapphira teach us that if we hold back on what we are supposed to give to the church then God will strike us down? NO!

I will admit that this story is often the "go-to" passage when you want to preach on stewardship and get people motivated to give. After all, there's nothing quite like a bit of coercion to get someone to open their pocketbook. When I read this story carefully, however, paying attention to everything that it says, I realize that it is not about stewardship at all. This story is about something that is more important than how much we give to the church. It is about one of the core values of our faith which is "covenant." This story is about a covenant which the early believers shared among themselves.

What do we know about the circumstances of this incident? It takes place post-resurrection and post-ascension. Jesus died. He rose from the dead, appeared to hundreds of his disciples, and ascended into heaven leaving his followers behind to continue his ministry. As we talked about last week, they were to make the kingdom of God evident on earth. They were to be God's neighborhood in the world.

The story takes place in Jerusalem where many believers lived and were gathered. They were afraid for their lives so they bonded together for safety. There were many widows and orphans among them who needed help to live day by day. They discovered new energy and purpose and hope in being together so they agreed to support one another.

Jesus told his followers that he would return and, understandably, they thought he meant in a few weeks or months. They expected him to come back any day and they were ready and waiting. Because they believed Jesus would come back and either gather them all up and take them to heaven or transform the way things happen on earth, they were not worried about holding onto what they had at that moment. They would not need any of their

“things” for long so they shared everything they had with the group. They made a covenant to live together in community and take care of one another.

Only four names are mentioned in this story. First, there is Thomas who was known by the nickname of “Barnabas” which means “son of encouragement.” Obviously, it was a name well deserved. As an example, we are told that Barnabas had a field which he sold and donated all of the proceeds to the community. We all know people who do such things. They encourage us with their generosity.

We are also offered a negative example of what happened in that group of believers. Ananias and Sapphira also had some property which they sold. Ananias brought their donation to the apostles but somehow Peter detected that something was amiss. Maybe he was familiar with the property and its worth and realized there was a discrepancy between its value and the coins stacked at his feet. Maybe he heard Ananias’ voice crack when he said that he, too, had sold some property and was giving the money to the community. Perhaps he noticed that Ananias would not look him in the eye or had his fingers crossed. Whatever it was, Peter knew that while Ananias pretended to donate the full amount of the sale, he was keeping some of the money for himself and his wife. Peter confronted Ananias and the man fell dead at his feet. Three hours later, Sapphira showed up, not knowing what had happened, and continued the deceit. She, too, was carried out to be buried.

Peter does a little theologizing by suggesting that these communal gifts are actually gifts given to God. By their deceit, Ananias and Sapphira grieved the Spirit of God which, we would agree, is a serious matter.

It is understandable that we focus the moral of the story on the fact that we should not deceive God. Yet, if the result of this story is that we place our offering envelopes in the plate with shaking hands, fearful that we might be the next victim of God’s wrath, then we might have missed the main point of the story.

Remember how the story begins: “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common . . . there was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:32, 34a). Granted, this arrangement sounds idealistic and utopian, if not impossible. Luke, the author of the book of Acts, explains why it was a beneficial arrangement with the positive example of Barnabas and the negative example of Ananias and

Sapphira. In general, there was a good spirit in the group. Everyone's needs were met. There was a sense of unity and well-being among everyone. Jesus would return soon and they would continue to live as the community of God in heaven or on earth. Either way, it would be perfect.

The early believers were bound together by a covenant. It was not merely an agreement that they would share everything in common, nor was it a contract which specified the expectations and consequences involved in being part of the community. Instead, it was a covenant based upon all of the covenants God had sealed with his people during the years, covenants based upon trust in a shared commitment to loyalty and generosity. From the beginning, God had watched over his people, provided for them, and helped them at every juncture of life. From the beginning, God's people had trusted, offered thanksgiving, and worked hard to emulate the goodness of God. But they also frequently walked away, grew selfish, and sought other gods. Nevertheless, God never walked away from them. Most important, the covenant which was sealed with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus pointed to a new way of life for God and God's people. The followers of Jesus living in Jerusalem depended upon one another to experience this new life together.

We are very familiar with contracts. We agree to certain conditions and requirements in exchange for some benefit we will enjoy. We lease an apartment and we get to stay in a building that is maintained to a certain degree as long as we pay the rent and fulfill other conditions in the contract. We accept a job with an understanding of salary and benefits and expectations of our work. If we or the person or business fail to abide by the contract, specific action can and often will be taken as indicated in the contract. In the story we are considering, we most often look at it as if Ananias and Sapphira were in a contract with God and did not keep their end of the bargain. Consequently, they paid the price. Note, however, that the story never says that God struck them down. We are told only that when confronted, Ananias and Sapphira each fell to the ground and died. Peter may try to make the connection that God's unhappiness with the pair caused their demise, but scripture does not tell us that is the case.

A covenant is different. It is based upon relationship rather than reward. A covenant is not a contract. It is a commitment among people and God to care for one another in a complete way. It is not concerned with mere compliance to a set of agreements. A covenant is a relationship of trust and well-being.

One of the best examples of a current covenant is the story from last week's news in which a man hunting for gold fell down a mine shaft and broke his legs. For two days he suffered without food or water while fending off rattlesnakes into whose den he had landed. He is alive today because he and his friend had an agreement, an understanding, a covenant that whenever one of them went on such an excursion, if he did not return in two days, the other one would go looking for him. That is what happened and that is how the injured man was found and rescued.

What does all of this mean for us? As followers of Jesus, we hold a covenant with one another. Ours is not a contract to sell everything that we own and contribute it to a common fund which supports us all, although some Christians do exactly that. Instead, ours is a covenant to worship, learn, and serve together as the Body of Christ in this place. We decide the kinds of things we will do and how we will do them. We agree to do whatever is necessary to carry out the ministry to which we believe God has called us. That means that we are always alert, always aware that we are needed—body, mind, soul, and resources—to support our common ministry.

In terms of our financial gifts, that means that we have made a commitment to fund our ministry. In terms of our physical involvement, it means that we have made a commitment to be present and to participate in whatever we do as a church. In terms of our support, it means that we have made a commitment to pray and encourage and undergird each other as a family of faith. Are we expected to do all of this on the same level. No. We all have varying abilities and resources, but we covenant together to do our part because we are committed to the family of faith we call Lakeside Baptist Church. No one gift is greater than another. No one talent is better than another. No particular amount of time is more significant than another. As Jesus reminded the disciples when James and John asked for places of honor in heaven, no follower of Christ is greater than another. In fact, as followers of Christ we forego greatness and become servants of one another. We are bound together in covenant through Jesus Christ our Lord who served us through his life, death, and resurrection.

How do we live together in covenant? We have to learn to let go of our fears of scarcity and need. We have to learn to trust in God's goodness and generosity. Canadian Minister and author Jim Taylor has a gift for paraphrasing psalms to make them our prayers for today. Listen to his version of Psalm 23:

God has walked with me; I could ask nothing more.
God has given me green meadows to laugh in,
clear streams to think beside,
untrodden paths to explore.
When I thought the world rested on my shoulders,
God put things into perspective;
When I lashed out at an unfair world,
God calmed me down;
When I drifted into harmful ways,
God straightened me out.
God was with me all the way.
I do not know what lies ahead, but I am not afraid.
I know God will be with me.
Even in death, I will not despair.
You will comfort me and support me.
Though my eye dims and my mind dulls,
You will continue to care about me.
Your touch will soothe the tension in my temples;
My fears will fade away.
I am content.
In life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with me.
All through life, I have found goodness in people.
When life ends, I expect to be gathered
into the ultimate goodness of God.

Jim Taylor
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When we learn to trust God with all of life then we learn that we can trust one another to walk with us through life. We also learn to live in such a way that other people can trust us to live as God leads us. Covenant is trust that each one in a relationship will fulfill their part of the relationship. Marriage is a covenant. Parenthood is a covenant. Friendship and neighborliness are covenants. Discipleship is a covenant. Barnabas was recognized as someone who lived up to his covenant responsibilities. Ananias and Sapphira are remembered because they did not. Ironically, "Ananias" means "God has dealt graciously," a reality Ananias apparently forgot when he decided not to fulfill his covenant commitments.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is a sad story, a dark story, a text of terror that I wish were not in the Bible. It does serve to remind us, however, that if we remember who we are as children of God, we will remember how graciously God has dealt with us and decide to be just as gracious with one another. Perhaps then we will also be known as a son or daughter of encouragement—people of the covenant of God’s love. I will support you and you will support me. We will support one another and the gift of God that is known as Lakeside Baptist Church will continue to bless this community. Amen.

October 21, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We have gathered today because we are your children, O God, and we need to be together in your presence. We have gathered because we are vibrantly aware of all of the goodness in our lives that emanates from your love. We gather because we need to be healed and filled and prepared to live fully in the world. We gather because we love you, O God, and we know that you love us.

We are thankful for the many ways, small and large, that you reminded us of your generosity this past week. A safe place to rest, an energetic place to study or work, a soothing place to seek help, a comforting place to expose our fears, a solid place to take a stand against injustice, a hopeful place to change the world—these are the places you met us and helped us. These are the places where we live and discovered that you live there too.

Today we pray for our friends who need to know that you are near. We pray for their health, for the strength to carry on and for the strength to let go. We pray for hope and information, for rest and renewal, for energy and calm. We pray for peace that they will not understand except that it wraps them in its love.

We are fortunate that today and probably tomorrow we can go about the routine activities of our lives. As the cool and colorful days of fall mesmerize us, remind us that our lives can change as quickly as the color of a leaf. Teach us to be grateful and generous in our response and to keep in our hearts those good people who have lost so much to storm and tragedy these last few weeks.

We gather to worship, O God, and to promise that we will not forget your goodness nor will we forget the goodness you have planted within our souls. We promise that we will remember to follow you into the world as did your Son our Savior. Amen.