

Good Stewards of God's Grace
SAYING "YES" TO GOD

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Are you as anxious about what this sermon is going to be about as I was when I picked this story from Acts and started preparing this sermon?

For years I used to joke that Acts 4:32 - 5:11 would make for a great stewardship sermon. Ha Ha! But I never really thought I'd preach about stewardship based on this story about Ananias and Sapphira. Then, about a month ago, I went to our presbytery's leadership workshop, called E³, and sat in two seminars about stewardship best practices. The sessions were led by two men from the Hudson River Presbytery in New York, one a teaching elder, one a ruling elder. During their presentation, the minister commented about how he made it a practice to preach about the story of Ananias and Sapphira when he talked about stewardship in his congregation. I thought, "Why not?"

Before we get to the story from Acts, let me share with you some thoughts about stewardship commitment that the two men presented in the workshops. These are guiding principles that have been expressed in the scripture lessons and sermons for the past few weeks under the overarching theme of "Good Stewards of God's Grace."

First, what stewardship is **not**. Stewardship is **not** . . .

- * a once a year event
- * all about money
- * fund raising
- * meeting a budget
- * just about us

But, stewardship **is** . . .

- * about making choices, as individuals and in a community
- * more than giving money to our church
- * faith raising
- * disciple making
- * about being faithful disciples, caring for and managing all that God has given

us

- * a trust from God, for the benefit of all people
- * treasure management that helps us escape the trap of selfishness by keeping ourselves spiritually focused on God
- * the grateful response to Christ's redeeming love

- * a way of glorifying God
- * a way of connecting people with God and with one another
- * using gifts and resources to reveal God's Kingdom here on earth
- * "the disciplined management of God's stuff"

Speaking of "stuff," have you ever heard George Carlin's take on "stuff"? He says, "Actually, this is just a place for my stuff, ya know? That's all; a little place for my stuff. That's all I want, that's all you need in life, is a little place for your stuff, ya know? I can see it on your table, everybody's got a little place for their stuff. This is my stuff, that's your stuff, that'll be his stuff over there.

"That's all you need in life, a little place for your stuff. That's all your house is- a place to keep your stuff. If you didn't have so much stuff, you wouldn't need a house. You could just walk around all the time. A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. You can see that when you're taking off in an airplane. You look down, you see everybody's got a little pile of stuff. All the little piles of stuff. And when you leave your house, you gotta lock it up. Wouldn't want somebody to come by and take some of your stuff. They always take the good stuff. They never bother with that other stuff you're saving. All they want is the shiny stuff. That's what your house is, a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get...more stuff! Sometimes you gotta move, gotta get a bigger house. Why? No room for your stuff anymore.

"Sometimes you leave your house to go on vacation. And you gotta take some of your stuff with you. Gotta take about two big suitcases full of stuff, when you go on vacation. You gotta take a smaller version of your house. It's the second version of your stuff. And you're gonna fly all the way to Honolulu. Gonna go across the continent, across half an ocean to Honolulu. You get down to the hotel room in Honolulu and you open up your suitcase and you put away all your stuff. 'Here's a place here, put a little bit of stuff there, put some stuff here, put some stuff- you put your stuff there, I'll put some stuff- here's another place for stuff, look at this, I'll put some stuff here.' And even though you're far away from home, you start to get used to it, you start to feel okay, because after all, you do have some of your stuff with you."

That's really what's going on in this story from Acts about life in the early Christian community — How much does our "stuff" control us? How will we use our "stuff" in the community? And, is our "stuff" really **our** stuff to begin with?

Socialist Karl Marx popularized the slogan, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" in an 1875 writing. Listen again to the description of life in that early community of believers: "No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common . . . There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."

Some people have read Acts 4:32, 34-35 and said, "That sounds like Christian communism or socialism!" But what Barnabas did with his land — and even what Ananias and Sapphira did with their land — takes care of that idea pretty quickly.

There is no indication in this story that anybody in that early Christian community was made to hand over their private property. In fact, the heading in my study Bible for the verses at the end of chapter four is, “The Believers Share Their Possessions.” When Peter confronts Ananias about what he has done, Peter seems to indicate that it was up to Ananias to decide what to do with his property: “While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal?” (Acts 5:4)

It would be too easy — and way too manipulative — to read this interesting story about the early Christian church and then proclaim, “Give or else you’ll die!” The contrast that is drawn between Barnabas on the one hand and Ananias and Sapphira on the other is not primarily about giving. Yes, it’s true, they all “laid the proceeds at the apostles’ feet.” Yes, it’s true that Ananias held some money back from the sale of his property, but he did bring some money to the church leaders. Also, he and his wife aren’t guilty of anything like embezzlement or theft. They sold what rightfully belonged to them and made a decision about what to do with the proceeds.

No, the issue has to do with the contrast between the *attitudes* of the givers, not just about their money, but especially about their place in the community of faith. Barnabas is held up as an example of someone who gave freely and, we suppose, from grateful motives. Ananias and Sapphira, in contrast, are presented as self-serving and, as a result, they lie to the church and to the apostles and, as Peter so bluntly puts it, “to God!”

What does all of this have to do with *us* being “good stewards of God’s grace”? The emphasis in the Acts story about giving is on the sense of community that developed among those early believers, because they were “of one heart and soul” and “with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.” (Acts 4:32-33) Those believers were moved to generosity as a result of the gospel message and the power of the Holy Spirit. Their faith gave them a new perspective on life, on what they had, and on how they would use what they had in the service of Jesus Christ and their brothers and sisters. The story suggests that what you do with what you have is a personal decision, but what you do (or *don’t* do) with what you have has a practical and significant effect on the community as a whole.

Later today, our elders-elect and I will spend several hours in officer/elder training as they prepare to be ordained and installed as members of the session’s Class of 2018. We will spend time this afternoon learning about the purpose and content of our *Book of Order*. It’s not entirely accurate to say that the *Book of Order* is just a “how to” administrative manual for the church, even if it lines out the responsibilities and methods of operation for congregations.

One of the main reasons for spending time exploring the *Book of Order* is to discover the theology behind what and how we do things in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In the chapter about the “Councils of the Church,” in a section called “Administration of Mission,” we affirm that “Mission determines the forms and structures

needed for the church to do its work . . . Administration enables the church to give effective witness in the world to God's new creation in Jesus Christ and strengthens the church's witness to the mission of the triune God . . . The funding of mission similarly demonstrates the unity and interdependence of the church. The failure of any part of the church to participate in the stewardship of the mission of the whole church diminishes that unity and interdependence. All mission funding should enable the church to give effective witness in the world to God's new creation in Jesus Christ, and should strengthen the church's witness to the mission of God." (G-3.0106)

That is why our church budget includes line items for ministries and mission beyond our four walls. Presbyterian congregations across southeastern send money to the Presbytery of Coastal Carolina to support area and worldwide mission projects. The presbytery sends money and special offerings to the Synod of the Mid-Atlantic and the General Assembly to help fund all sorts of ministries, including world missions, Christian education, youth and young adult ministries, and support of congregations in their own ministries.

At last Saturday's presbytery meeting, we heard a report from the Finance and Property Committee about the need to cut next year's budget by \$100,000 because of the decrease in benevolent giving by congregations. As a result, many different mission programs will be directly affected next year. In a domino effect, the presbytery also voted to reduce the amount of support that will be sent on to the synod and General Assembly during the rest of this year and in 2016. So, yes, what we decide to do with our "stuff" has some very practical consequences in terms of mission and outreach.

Decisions about our own giving and our church's giving, along with these stories from Acts 4 & 5, are and should be reflections of what we say we believe. Remember how Luke begins this account of the early church's life in chapter 4 — "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul . . . With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all." (4:32, 33)

As someone has asked, "How might the community of Christ-followers itself be a 'sign' that encourages belief? As church, how do we embody the message of Jesus by our life together?"¹

Your session will meet Tuesday night and work on the 2016 budget. Those two questions will be good guides for us as we consider what God is calling us to do as the Wallace Presbyterian Church and as we make decisions about **how** to do **what** God is calling us **to** do.

Early on in this sermon, I shared some ideas about what stewardship **is not and is**. Here's something else to think about as the people of God who are called to be "good stewards of God's grace" —

"Since stewardship is our response to the grace and goodness of God, what we do with what has been entrusted to us is our true worship. To live out a commitment that reflects the Lordship of God over all we are and have and to live humbly and sensitively before others is to be a steward. It is the way we say "YES" to God."²

Let us pray: Living Lord, obeying Christ's command to love our neighbor as ourselves, we dedicate ourselves to loving service. Thankful for the gifts and abilities you have given us, we dedicate them to you. May our lives and our service build up the body of Christ and serve your purposes in our community and in the world. Amen.

NOTES

¹Troy Troftgruben, "Commentary on Acts 4:32-35," at www.workingpreacher.org.

²William M. Paul, "Making Stewards: a manifesto," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, August 26, 2014 at www.pres-outlook.org/2014/08/making-stewards-manifesto/