

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
May 29, 2016

A Community of Sharing

Acts 4:32-5:11

In last Sunday's sermon, I focused on trust, and how critical trust is when it comes to cultivating a vital congregation that's being a faithful messenger of the gospel. In order to display trustworthiness and faithfulness beyond our walls, we have to nurture trustworthiness and faithfulness within our walls. If we're going to urge others to be reconciled to God, then we need to be practicing reconciliation among ourselves. And where reconciliation in Christ is at work, you'll also see trust taking shape.

We see trust developing and growing within the early church as we look at the scenes Luke presents to us in this morning's Scripture passage. Before he goes into specifics about what reconciliation and trust look like, Luke gives us a summary statement about the unity of Jesus' followers. "All the believers were one in heart and mind" (v. 32a). Remember that Luke is describing life in the church not long after the experience of Pentecost. He's giving us a snapshot of what salvation looks like among those who confess Jesus as Lord. And in this photo, we see the comprehensive unity that the Holy Spirit creates and enables. "All the believers were one in heart and mind."

So it should come as no surprise that this unity included the way that they held and managed their possessions. Luke says, "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had" (v. 32b). Their unity wasn't just a matter of shared beliefs, shared commitments, and shared convictions. It was also a matter of shared wealth and property. Their practice of holding all things in common meant exactly that—all things—including financial and material resources. According to Luke, the church purse grew, particularly as some folks in the congregation liquidated their assets and gave the money to help provide for the poor in the fellowship.

Several years ago, a church in California decided to do something about the need for children's health care in the country of Malawi, Africa. The church decided to raise \$160,000 to build a fully-equipped pediatric clinic. Though this was a fairly large church, the project was far beyond anything they'd ever done, so they decided to raise the funds through a special Christmas Eve offering. The pastor summarizes what happened:

The mood was electric on Christmas Eve as people brought their gifts to the front and put them in large baskets. Women cried, children ran up smiling, people gave with the greatest joy we have ever seen. They were delighted to give to God that which cost them something. People came in droves, three rows in the lobby, chairs in every doorway, people standing along the walls. People from the community had heard of the project and wanted to participate.

Before taking the offering, the pastor asked everyone to write on their envelopes where the money had come from. It turns out that children had sold toys and candy, saved allowances, babysat, and sacrificed Christmas presents to be able to give to the children of Malawi. As for the adults, they had given up physical therapy, Christmas presents, and winter vacations. Some had hosted dinners, sold stock and cars, and donated savings. One

couple had even donated money they had planned to use for fertility drugs, hoping that even if they couldn't have a baby, maybe they could help save the life of someone else's. This was an offering where everyone dug down deep and made personal sacrifices to achieve the goal. And when everything had been collected and counted, the congregation had raised \$525,057!¹

As I noted, what was striking about this offering wasn't just the total, but the expectation that the givers tell where the money came from. If a similar method had been used in the early church as described by Luke, some of the envelopes would have revealed that the contributors had sold a house or some land to come up with the money. In fact, when the service was over and the apostles gathered up the envelopes and took them to the church tellers for counting, they noticed one in particular, from a man named Joseph, aka Barnabas, disclosing that he sold a few acres of property in order to contribute to the congregation's ministry.

Note that Joseph's gift was about more than just dollars and cents. It was also about trust. Trust in God and trust in the other members of the congregation. It took a lot of trust for Joseph to sell that field he owned. It took a lot of trust to reveal to the church where the money had come from. It took a lot of trust to hand the proceeds over to the church leaders and to count on them to distribute the funds wisely. It took a lot of trust that those who got assistance were speaking truthfully about their needs. In the early church, the patterns of giving, and the practice of sharing possessions, presumed an enormous amount of trust, in God and in each other.

That's why, in the very next scene, the behavior of Ananias and Sapphira is so shocking, and the consequences so terrifying. Just as Joseph's gift was a prime example of truthfulness and mutual trust, so Ananias and Sapphira's offering was a demonstration of deception and falsehood. Turns out that this seemingly generous and sacrificial couple has actually held back some of the profits for themselves. What appeared to be a Barnabas-like sacrifice is actually just a percentage gift, with the rest tucked away in an online savings account for themselves.

We soon learn that while planning for their financial future, Ananias and Sapphira should have also reviewed their life insurance policies. After all, who knew that this trip to church would be their last. The head of the community, Peter himself, tells them the truth about their offering. Instead of commending them for being generous, Peter condemns them for being deceptive. The bottom line is that they have lied to God and to the community of God's people. They've undermined the unity of the fellowship of believers. Their behavior has virtually severed the tie that binds, and for that, they're severed from life itself.

The contrast between Joseph's gift and the one offered by Ananias and Sapphira shows us that one of the early church's most prized possessions was mutual trust. Money was important, but money, and more specifically how it was shared, was a sign of an even deeper, more fundamental reality, namely, that followers of Jesus belong to God and to one another. "No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own." That kind of outlook, and that way of sharing resources, probably seems inconceivable to most churchgoers in our day and time. At first glance, it doesn't even look like a real option for contemporary Christians. That in itself reveals just how far we still have to go in truly being "one in heart and mind."

Bishop Stewart Ruch III tells about some of his in-laws who are missionaries in Brazil. He says that for years they rented a house that they used not only for their own family but also to practice hospitality for people in their community. One day a wealthy widow approached Ruch's in-laws and said, "I want to buy the house you are renting and give it you. Please

take this as a free gift, without any strings attached. I can afford it, and I want to give it to you.” It was a beautiful, gracious, and unexpected gift. As Ruch puts it:

For the next twenty years, at no point did my in-laws ever say, “This is such an incredible gift; somehow we have to earn the money so we can pay her back. We must repay this debt.” They knew that they could never repay this woman for her generosity. So what did they do? Naturally, they brought her close. They became family, and they included her in all their activities. My in-laws kept thinking about ways to express their gratitude and to honor her. “As she has given to us,” they kept saying, “we don’t have to give back to her; we *want* to give back to her. The gift she gave to us didn’t come with strings attached, but it has bonded us to her forever. We belong to her and she belongs to us.”²

Remember that the early church’s practice of sharing possessions was part of their testimony to the resurrection of Jesus. It was a manifestation of the Holy Spirit’s presence and work among them. It was a sign that God’s gracious act of salvation in Christ had bound them to God and to one another. They belonged to God and to one another, which only naturally meant that their money and property weren’t private possessions. They held them in common with everyone else sitting there in the pews.

As I mentioned, this way of being church and doing church may sound like it’s completely beyond the realm of possibility for us. If so, that’s partly because our ways of acquiring and handling possessions have been so deeply shaped by our individualistic culture where personal ownership is supreme. What’s mine is mine and what’s yours is yours. But in the community of believers, it’s not primarily about what’s mine and what’s yours. It’s most of all about what’s the Lord’s. And the simplest answer is, all of it. It all ultimately belongs to him. This fundamental truth of the Christian life enables us to loosen our grip on our possessions, including our money, and lay our gifts at the feet of the risen Lord.

Our congregation is a community of sharing. That all sounds very nice, and is very easy to say, but is much harder to actually do. We’re called to bring all that we are and all that we have and place them before the one who reigns in the power of the Spirit. But if there’s one area in particular where we continually need the Spirit to motivate us, mobilize us, and move us into deeper solidarity with each other, it’s in our use of money. That’s because the ways that property and possessions bind us to one another, or separate us from another, aren’t always as visible and evident as some of the other things that we contribute to our common life as a congregation. True, we can look at the numbers and see whether we met the goal for a missions offering or adequately funded the church budget or raised enough money during the capital campaign. All these are good and important, but there’s more to being a community of sharing than just hitting financial targets.

In today’s text, Joseph and the others who give money are doing more than just funding day-to-day operations and meeting short term needs. More than anything, they’re using their dollars to demonstrate how their lives are inseparably bound to the lives of everyone else in the fellowship. They’re showing what’s possible when a congregation is powered by God’s presence. They’re living out the fact that none of us can get to the point of full generosity and complete flourishing on our own. They’re showing us that being “one in heart and mind” is impossible without sharing all things, including and especially our possessions.

¹ As told by Lee Eclov. Source: Alpha Lim, “Christmas gift idea—fully equipped children’s hospital,” Soulcareres blog.

² Stewart Ruch III, from the sermon “Why We Give to Worship and Mission,” preached at Church of the Resurrection, Wheaton, Illinois (January 16, 2011). PreachingToday website. Accessed May 26, 2016 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2011/february/6020711.html>>.