

## The Dumbest People in the Bible

### 6. Ananias and Sapphira

Acts 5:1-11

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First  
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on September 4, 2016]

#### I

The story is told that once a portrait was being painted of the great British statesman Oliver Cromwell.

Mr. Cromwell had a number of disfiguring warts on his face.

The painter thought he would please his famous subject by painting the portrait as better-than-life,

a portrait suitable for immortality—  
in other words, a portrait of Cromwell without the warts.

Oliver Cromwell took one look at the finished portrait and said,

*"Take it away, and paint me warts and all."*

#### II

Have you ever noticed that the Bible never paints idealized, bigger-than-life portraits of people, events, situations, or churches?

The Bible states the truth as it is and paints the picture as it is—  
warts and all.

**Abraham**, father of the faithful, was a cowardly liar who tried to pass his wife off as his sister—twice.

**Noah**, builder of the ark, got drunk and couldn't keep his clothes on.

**Moses**, the great lawgiver, had an uncontrollable temper.

**David**, greatest of kings, had the personal ethics of a...politician.

**Elijah**, greatest of prophets, suffered from a terrible depression and went and sulked in a cave.

**Peter**, greatest of the disciples, denied even knowing Jesus.

**Paul**, greatest of the apostles, considered himself the worst of sinners.

The Bible is stubbornly honest in its portrayal of each of them—  
**warts and all.**

The same can be said for Luke's portrait of the early church in the Book of Acts.

Luke describes the early church in its totality, including the warts.

In Acts chapter one, the believers meet in the upper room to pray and wait.

They are obedient...they are faithful.

In chapter 2, the Holy Spirit comes upon them on the Day of Pentecost.

They are powerful...they are growing.

In chapter 3, the apostles Peter and John heal a disabled man in front of the Temple, to the great consternation of the authorities.

They are serving...they are fearless.

In chapter 4, we are told that the believers were "of one mind and heart," that no one was in need because they shared what they owned with each other.

They are united...they are generous.

The impression formed in these first four chapters of Acts is of a church that is...  
so powerful with the Holy Spirit,  
so loving in its care of others,  
so clear in its witness to the risen Lord,  
that one can't help but think:

*"What a great church! I'd give anything to belong to a church like that."*

### III

But then we turn to Acts chapter 5,  
and we discover the church revealed for what it is—  
**warts and all.**

In spite of all that God was doing in that church,  
it still had its problems,  
there still were conflicts,  
the church still had its share of people with warts.

Among them was a couple named *Ananias* and *Sapphira*.

According to Acts 5, this couple decided to sell some land and donate the proceeds to the church.

Their action was not without precedent.

The end of Acts 4 describes how a man named Joseph, a native of Cyprus, sold a piece of property and then contributed the entire amount to the Benevolence Fund, so that the money could be used to take care of widows and orphans and poor people.

So encouraging was this action to the believers that they awarded Joseph a nickname—*Barnabas*, which means "Son of Encouragement."

His generosity was an inspiration to everyone,  
including *Ananias* and *Sapphira*.

They, too, sold some property,  
but before presenting the money to Peter,  
they decided to hold back a portion of it for themselves.

Now there was nothing wrong with that.

They certainly were entitled to keep part of the money.

In fact, they could have kept all the money.

They were under no compulsion to give any of it.

Their sin came from the fact that they pretended that the amount they gave was the full amount they had received from the sale of the property.

Now neglect of the poor in that day was nothing new.

And it certainly was (and is) not unusual for someone to pretend to help those in need while diverting the money to other purposes.

You've all seen those heart-tugging ads run by the Wounded Warrior Project.

Perhaps you have donated to that charity or signed up to become a member at \$19.00 a month.

It seems not all the money donated for wounded warriors has been used to their benefit.

Last January CBS News reported discrepancies in how much Wounded Warrior Project claimed to be spending on its mission and how it actually used millions of dollars in donations.

Over forty former employees accused the leaders of the charity of holding lavish off-site conferences, retreats, and parties for employees at luxury hotels, resorts, and conference centers that included expensive meals with alcoholic beverages, all paid for by donations.

After the initial CBS News report, an internal investigation by the board of Wounded Warrior Project resulted in the firing of the CEO for focusing more on fundraising than on serving the needs of veterans.

The new CEO, a retired U.S. Army general, has promised reforms, greater transparency, and increased funding of mental health services for veterans.

Sometimes greed gets in the way of doing the right thing.

It is no accident that the Bible says the love of money is the root of all evil.

How many times have we witnessed those entrusted with the responsibility of spending donated funds to benefit those in need failing to uphold that trust?

#### IV

Ananias brings the money and gives it to Peter  
and then waits for the applause to start.

But instead all he hears is a deafening silence.

Instead of a smile,  
Peter's forehead wrinkles  
and his eyes tear up.

Instead of looks of admiration and appreciation,  
Ananias receives icy stares.

Peter's solemn words (spoken more in sorrow than anger) break the silence:

*Ananias, why are you so full of the devil that you lied to the Holy Spirit and kept some of the money from the sale of the land? Wasn't the property yours all along? Aren't you the one who made the decision to sell it?*

*Then what came over you to cause you to do a thing like this?*

*You're not playing false with us—you're cheating God!"*

Ananias could have kept the money, because God didn't want his money—  
**God wanted him.**

The undeniable truth of the charge,  
and the unbearable shame of it,  
were more than Ananias could take.

He dropped over dead.

About three hours later his wife Sapphira arrived,  
not knowing what had happened.

If she had been sensitive to anything at all beyond her own greed and ego,  
she would have been aware that something was wrong.

The sense of jubilation that is present in the church whenever good stewardship is  
exercised was absent.

People looked at her...and looked away in shame and fear.

No one seemed to want to say very much to her.

Peter asked her, "Tell me, did you get this amount of money for selling that  
property?"

She said, "Yes, that is correct."

Peter asked,

*"Do you also think that you can fool God? The men who buried your  
husband are back, and they will bury you too!"*

Immediately she fell over dead and was carried out and buried with her husband.

## V

Now there are a number of disturbing things about this story,  
not the least being how it easily becomes another example in people's minds  
of how God "zaps" sinners.

As if Peter and God couldn't wait to catch someone in a lie...  
and then.....ZAP! You're dead!

But that is not the way it works.

God is not shocked by our sins.

Not those of Ananias.

Not those of Sapphira.

Not yours.

Not mine.

There is no sin that any of us has committed,  
there is no sin that any of us is now practicing,  
that God is unwilling to forgive.

God is mercy...  
God is love...  
and there is always more grace in God than there is sin in us.

Nevertheless, two very fine church members dropped dead in that church.

I say "fine" church members because they met the criteria we go by.

They attended regularly.

They were good stewards...giving even more than 10% of their money.

They were a nice couple—  
as far as we know neither of them was cheating on the other.

Our Session would be head-over-heels with joy in voting such a couple into the membership.

You would welcome them as new members of this church without any hesitation whatsoever.

In fact, I am surprised the early church didn't hush this story up.

It certainly would not have been conducive to church growth.

Can you imagine inviting your friends to church and then telling them: *"Oh yeah, we're the church where those two people dropped dead the other day"*?

This story reveals that something was wrong in the church...dead wrong.

Ananias and Sapphira weren't real.

They weren't true.

There were not as they appeared to be.

They were dishonest...  
 they were pretending...  
 they were dead.

As Frederick Beuchner says:

*Lying to God is like sawing the branch you're sitting on.  
 The better you do it, the harder you fall.*

## VI

Why did Ananias and Sapphira do it?

Why did they lie to the church and to the Lord?

Perhaps they saw the praise and attention that Barnabas was receiving,  
 and wanted some of that to fall on them.

Perhaps they wanted to be on a first-name basis with the Apostles—  
 after all, the church had grown so much that it would have been easy  
 to be anonymous.

Perhaps they wanted to have special seats reserved for them at the agape  
 meals.

Perhaps they wanted to hear others' whispered words of approval—  
 "Have you heard what they did?...  
 How wonderful...  
 how generous!"

Whatever their motivation, Ananias and Sapphira allowed  
 their greed,  
 their ambition,  
 their selfishness,  
 their pride  
 to get the best of them.

Their deceit was intentional.

The judgment was swift and sure.

And so the church is "terrified."

That's how the story concludes...(vs. 11):

*"The church and all who heard of it were terrified."*

And who can blame them.

For what made them feel so frightened is the same thing that scare us to death—

The fear that someone will find out who we really are  
and know that we are pretending.

The fear that someone will see our warts,  
not our make-up and our fashionable clothes.

The fear that someone may suspect what we know to be true—  
that every one of us is less than perfect,  
less than honest,  
less than completely faithful.

## VII

What could have saved Ananias and Sapphira?

The same thing that can save us—  
being honest,  
being true.

This is exactly what the Bible means by **confession**.

What picture comes into your mind when you hear the word "confession"?

Do you think of a little booth and a priest?

That may be what confession means for some Christians.

But that too easily misses the intent of New Testament confession.

**Confession in the New Testament means to be honest with God in front of one or more other people.**

Think about that—confession is being honest with God in the presence of one other person, or several persons.

That is why Presbyterian worship includes a Prayer of Confession.

It is corporate confession in which we acknowledge that sin is a powerful force in the world and in each of our lives—

all of us have “sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23),  
and we all stand in need of God’s forgiveness and grace.

Such honesty is the way Christians find the power of the Holy Spirit active in their lives.

Such honesty is the way a group of Christians becomes a congregation.

Such honesty is the way people's lives are transformed and the Spirit of God is unleashed into the world.

How about you?

Will you risk some honesty with God?

Will you risk being honest with those around you?

Will you risk being yourself in this congregation?

The alternative is...well, let's just say Ananias and Sapphira found out what the alternative is.

## VIII

But there is another thing about this disturbing story—  
and that is what it says to the church.

The church has never been perfect at any point in its almost 2000 year history,  
and it will never be until history comes to an end.

This church—

First Presbyterian Church of Portland—

is a great church,

a loving church,

a generous church,

with a rich history going back almost 145 years.

But this church has never been perfect at any point in its history...  
and it never will be.

And people who run from church to church looking for...

the perfect congregation,

with perfect members,

perfect music,

perfect programs,

and a perfect preacher (one without warts?),

well, such people are destined to run forever.

A perfect church just does not exist.

Even Jesus' hand-picked disciples had their fair share of warts.

Are all congregations the same? No!

Some are large,

some are small,

some are more spiritual...

some are more liberal...

some are more mission-minded...

some are more social justice oriented...

some are more personal...

some are more evangelical...

some are more ecumenical.

But even when you find the perfect congregation,

the one that completes your checklist,  
it still will not be perfect.

It will be a congregation with "warts and all."

And even if you were to find the perfect church,  
once you joined it, guess what?—  
it would no longer be perfect!

## IX

So the challenge all of us face is to worship, pray, and work within the church we have—with all of its weaknesses and warts.

We are to love the people of our church and be loved by them.

We are to work together for the building of God's Kingdom through our church.

We are to open ourselves to the Spirit's presence,  
so that God can work in our lives and in the life of our church.

When we allow the Lord to keep us humble at the foot of the cross,  
then we will be real in all that we do.

And when we take the risk of being real with one another,  
then God gives us the grace to be honest,  
compassionate,  
generous,  
and loving toward one another.

And this church—  
First Presbyterian Church Portland—  
will become all that God wants it to be.

For as an anonymous poet wrote:

*I think that I shall never see  
A church that's all it ought to be  
A church whose members never stray  
Beyond the straight and narrow way*

*A church that has no empty pews  
Whose pastor never has the blues  
A church whose deacons always 'deke'  
And none are proud, all are meek  
Where gossips never peddle lies  
Or make complaints or criticize  
Where all are always sweet and kind  
And all to others' faults are blind  
Such perfect churches there may be  
But none of them is known to me  
But still I'll work and pray and plan  
To make this church the best I can.*

Amen.

Sources:

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