

A Whopper on the Pledge Card
Acts 4:32—5:11
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What's the most outrageous thing you could write down on a pledge card? \$100 a week? \$1000 a week? How about a large screen TV? A boat? A car? A lake cabin? And what's going to happen if you don't pay it? The church might send out a statement indicating you're behind on your pledge. But anything else? You're not going to fall over dead, are you?

Today we're taking a closer look at the story of Ananias and Sapphira. I invite you to turn to Acts 5:1: "But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet."

This is one of those strange stories in the Bible that leave us scratching our heads. And if we're honest, it might also leave us feeling just a little nervous. I mean, if Ananias and Sapphira pay such a steep price for their misdeeds, what about you and me?

Frankly we don't know why Ananias and Sapphira wrote down such a whopper on their pledge card. What we do know is that when the time came, they either couldn't pay it or didn't want to pay it.

So what's the big deal—they got in over their heads; they stretched the truth a little—doesn't everybody? Think about it: if all the politicians in this country who stretched the truth in their political ads one day fell over dead, we might not have any politicians left at all. (I know what you're thinking...don't go there.)

In trying to make sense of the Ananias and Sapphira story, let's back up and rehearse the first four chapters of Acts:

In chapter 1 Jesus ascends into heaven. Before he goes, he gives the disciples their mission: "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Jesus' words are the driving force of the entire book. In chapter 2 we find out how the disciples are going to carry out this mission: with power, the power of the Holy Spirit! And get this, the Spirit isn't just for prophets or preachers anymore, it's for everyone—butchers and bakers and workers at IBM. In chapter 3 we see the power of the Spirit at work in a concrete way: ordinary followers of Jesus—Peter and John—do something extraordinary: they heal a

man who's been lame since birth. Their action causes such a stir that by chapter 4, Peter and John get arrested for disturbing the peace.

That brings us to today's reading. Here we get a behind-the-scenes glimpse of life for the early followers of Jesus. They're in the honeymoon period. Life may be threatening on the outside—disciples getting arrested and all—but on the inside it's rosy. Keep in mind, Acts was written 30-50 years after these events took place. Luke, like a lot of preachers, may be waxing on about “the good old days.”

As we paint this picture, join me in reading 4:32-33: “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. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them...” In other words, they were one big happy family.

I'll admit it, a part of me is a bit skeptical of this picture. People aren't that nice to each other, are they? Well, maybe sometimes they are.

A few years ago I led a mission trip to Tanzania. As part of the trip, we made connections with the medical missionaries we were supporting, Dr. Steve and Bethany Friberg. Steve told us how the clinic worked. Members of the Maasai Tribe would come for medical care from the surrounding villages. They would walk anywhere from 1-20 miles. It cost \$2 to see the doctor, \$5 for medication, \$25 to have surgery. Since the Maasai don't have much money, they have to find a way to pay the bill. So what do they do? They pass the hat. Family members contribute. It isn't a rule, but it's an expectation. Any time a family member has a particular need...a new baby, a new roof, a new cow, everybody chips in. *There's not a needy person among them.*

A part of us thinks: that wouldn't work here; that sounds like communism or something. Rest assured, Acts isn't giving us a new economic system. It's giving us a snapshot of life for the early believers. Everybody was looking out for everybody else.

Aren't there moments when the church still operates this way? New parents give birth to premie twins who have to be hospitalized for a long time. Friends from church bring them meals for a couple of months and offer to clean their house. Somebody loses their home in a

fire. The church holds a pancake breakfast. A town floods. People sign up to help with the clean-up. Even today, followers of Jesus have a way of looking out for each other.

Sometimes it goes even further. In a previous congregation, two elderly couples decided to give their homes away. Their children didn't need the homes and they really didn't need the money. So these couples wrote it into their wills to donate their homes to the church. They figured the church could find something good to do with them.

There's a major theme in the Bible that runs all the way from Genesis to Revelation. That is, *God is in the business of forming a special people*. God isn't forming this special people so they can sit around and have a cozy relationship with him, however. God wants this people to be the light of the world. That's what is going on in Acts. There's a rhythm of gathering and scattering. The early Christians gather to learn and pray and break bread and look out for each other. Then they scatter into the world to share the love of Jesus with others.

Everything is going along swell in the community. The honeymoon is in full swing. But then one day Ananias and Sapphira show up. They put a checkmark on the *Life at Zumbro* form: they want to become members. At the new member class, they follow up by putting a whopper on their pledge card. Pretty soon the early Christians are facing their first big crisis. And it's over money.

Again, we don't know why Ananias and Sapphira did what they did. Even though Barnabas had sold his land and everybody was patting him on the back, it doesn't seem to have been a requirement. Notice what Peter says in Acts 5:3: "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal?"

I wonder if this couple did what they did because—much like the Maasai in Tanzania—it was the expectation. And then, at the last minute, they got cold feet. And they couldn't follow through. It was too much money!

So again, what's the problem? I think it's the deception. After all, you start telling lies to each other and pretty soon you don't have anything to build a relationship on. You can't trust each other.

When I was on internship in Milwaukee, one of the leaders of the church also happened to be an offering counter. Every week when he was counting the offering, he would write out a

check for \$100 and put it in the offering plate. Then he would take out \$95 in cash. The other counters thought it was a bit odd, but the guy said he needed small bills for making change at his business. There was only one slight problem. The man was claiming on his tax returns to give \$5200 a year to the church, instead of \$260. And then one day he got caught. The lie was exposed. He ended up in jail. And it was a devastating blow to that little church. It just goes to show: when you don't tell the truth to each other, trust gets destroyed.

Peter exposes the deception of Ananias and Sapphira. There's a steep price to pay, the ultimate price. Let's be honest...we don't like this part of the story very much. We start squirming in our seats. We can understand these two getting reprimanded for their lie, but did they have to fall down dead?

Whatever we make of this story, there's seems to be a deeper truth at work. Something like: *Don't trample on God's people*. Maybe it just seems like a little white lie you're telling, maybe it just seems like a petty squabble, maybe it just seems like harmless gossip, but when God is forming a people to be the light of the world, God demands that we take our responsibility to our brothers and sisters in the faith very seriously.

There's a recent phenomenon in our culture that I heard about on MPR. It's called "silent rave." It first got started in New York City's Union Square. People received an invitation to participate on Facebook. They came to Union Square at a set time with their MP3 players and headphones. Then, when the signal was given, they switched on their MP3s and started dancing. They were all dancing at the same time, but everybody was listening to a different tune, and so they ended up kind of doing their own thing.

You can check it out on YouTube. Silent wave is fun to watch. People seem to be having a good time. Still, I can't help but wonder, if everybody's dancing to a different tune, is this really community?

That's the thing about the early Christians: they were trying to dance to the same tune. They were bound by their common confession that Jesus is Lord. Their life was marked by their ongoing concern for one another. When Ananias and Sapphira entered the scene, they tried to join the dance. But they were listening to a different tune. It threatened the very make-up of the community.

What this strange little story tells me is that it's not easy to be the church and to keep dancing together. It never has been. There are pressures on the outside and pressures on the inside. If we're not careful, those pressures can tear us apart.

Like Ananias and Sapphira, we're going to have times when we screw up. God will not be pleased with us. But most of the time—thankfully—God will be patient with us and forgive us and give us another chance. And in the process, God will keep right on forming us into a people who are meant to be the light of the world.

Friends, it comes down to this. God has high expectations of us and our little gathering called the church. God expects that we will take our relationships seriously. God expects that we will look out for each other. God expects that whatever we do—whether we're serving on the church council or making lefse for the Bazaar or filling out a pledge card—that we will do it for the right reasons. And, most importantly, God expects that we will continue to be God's witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth. Amen