

Joy and Laughter/Stewardship Sunday

April 28, 2019

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Acts 4:32-37

Acts 5:1-11

Big Little Liars

There was a Levite ... Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement) – Acts 4:36



Happy Frog by Artyom Krivosheev

The first reading from Acts (just read) is an idyllic story of church harmony and community. Who wouldn't want to be a part of THAT congregation! Everybody got along; the parking places were all on the first row! The coffee was never too weak or too strong, and you could put up a table for your ministry anywhere you wanted! *Everyone was of one heart and soul*, and nobody complained ... *the apostles gave their testimony with great power, and they never had to call anybody to ask, "Why haven't you turned in your pledge card?"*

Those were the good old days! Anybody miss the good old days when everybody came to church every Sunday? Remember that? When ice cream was a nickel? I don't. I took the kids out for ice cream – 5 bucks for an ice cream cone. That cone should come with a pearl of great price at the bottom. I don't actually remember ice cream for 5 cents, but some of y'all ... remember the Good Old Days before Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. When you had to take a picture of your dinner with a real camera, then go get the film developed, then go around to all your friends and neighbors and show them pictures of your dinner. Some of y'all remember that. You don't? Me neither.

We do some weird things these days, but the truth is, the good old days were never all that good. Somebody said,

“If you're yearning for the good old days, just shut off the air conditioning.”

Nothing is as responsible for nostalgia as a bad memory.

When Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles, he made a serious effort to set down an orderly account of what happened in the early days of the Christian church. I know this is true...why else would he have included the story I am about to read? (Ordinarily I try to give the lectors all the 7-syllable names to say. That makes them sound spiritually mature.) Today's lector read the account of the generosity of the early church.

Here's the rest of the story, Acts, chapter 5, verses 1-11. Notice that the chapter, not the sentence, not the paragraph, but the chapter, begins with "But." Not a good sign – because, you know, the truth always comes after the "But"

There was a man named Joseph, nicknamed Barnabas, who sold a field and gave the whole amount to the church...

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.

"Ananias," Peter asked, "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? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!"

Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price." And she said, "Yes, that was the price." Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out."

Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

The Word of the Lord? Thanks be to God. Do you mean that? I mean, yikes!

I don't think I've ever preached this text before today. When I looked back at my seminary preaching class notes on Stewardship Sermons, I found a note scratched in the margin that I can't quite read. It either says, "Don't ever start with a joke and Acts chapter 5," or it says, "Definitely start with a joke and Acts chapter 5."

So...

There was a church that hit a rough patch. They needed to replace their old boiler, and upgrade the HVAC. Bob, the chair of the Property ministry came to the pastor just before Pledge Sunday and said, "See if you can get everybody to step up their giving this year; it's really important." So the pastor talked to the organist to see if he could play something extra inspirational.

The organist said: "Sure." No, he said, "All my stuff is inspirational, but I'll think of something." And the pastor got up to explain the situation. She said, "We still need \$30,000 more for the

Youth Room HVAC and another \$175,000 for the Fellowship Hall. Those who promise to pledge at least \$10,000 this year please stand up.

Just then the organist broke into *The Star Spangled Banner*.

Wonder if that's how Peter got the Jerusalem church to "lay it all down" for Jesus? Either that, or the threat of death. I've never been tempted to try that.

Actually, Luke doesn't say that Ananias and Sapphira died because they withheld their offering – though I do not recommend that! No, they died of exposure. Peter exposed them as liars in front of the church. I don't think Peter handled this in the most pastoral way possible.

Joseph's nickname is "Barnabas," which means Son of Encouragement...a really good guy who sold some valuable real estate and gave all the proceeds to meet the pressing needs of the church. Ananias and Sapphira wanted to make an impressive gift too. But they weren't looking at meeting a need; they were looking for attention, so they lied. They said they gave everything, when in truth they gave only a part.

And they got noticed – when they both keeled over in front of everybody, after being exposed as hypocrites and big little liars. Taking an offering in the Jerusalem Church was never the same after that.

It's hard to read this story. It hits too close to home. Most of us *want to be* as faithful and generous as God intends but...

When it comes to giving, some people stop at nothing.

A local man was out in his driveway polishing his new car when his neighbor walked up. "Nice car!" remarked his neighbor "How'd you afford that?" The other fella replied, "Easy, I cancelled my church pledge." His neighbor looked surprised and said, "Gee, I wish I could buy a car for that little."

Liars and hypocrites...that's the charge most often leveled against the church by unbelievers. We say we live for others when in fact we are really here to get something of this for ourselves – eternal life, peace of mind, and blessings. Critics claim that we deceive ourselves, and we lie to God, and that we think we are better than everybody else. This is absolutely NOT true of Presbyterians. We KNOW that we are just as rotten as everybody else. But...

There was a minister walking down the street one day when he came upon a group of boys standing in a circle. At the center of the circle was this old dog. Concerned that they might be going to hurt the animal, the pastor said, "What are you boys doing?"

"This dog's just an old stray," said one of the bigger boys, "We all want him, but only one of us can take him home. So we decided that whoever can tell the biggest lie can keep him."

The pastor responded, “You boys know that it’s a sin to lie? Why, when I was your age I never told a lie.”

There was a loooooong pause while the boys looked at each other. The pastor started to think he had gotten through to them. The smallest boy took a deep sigh and said, “All right, give him the dog.”

It’s funny, but ...

Hypocrisy *is* a problem. The public hypocrisy of some of the flashier preachers of our day damages the cause of Christ. It seems like the more dogmatic and rigid their message, the more spectacular the fall from grace. We should not be surprised; Jesus was very hard on the hypocrites calling them/us, “blind guides” and “white washed tombs.”

On behalf of all the hypocrites, I say, “Yes, we are! We are hypocrites.” We don’t want to be, but we are. None of us have pure motives. To some degree or another we all want attention and the approval of others. Not one of us is as generous or as selfless as we could be. Paul said it best: *All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.* The difference here is that we know it!

Next time someone says, “There are too many hypocrites in the church,” ask: “Well, where do you want us to be? Isn’t that the whole reason for the church? To help us get ... what’s the sober equivalent to non-hypocrisy? We come to church to try and become more authentic? Transparent. Christ-like. Real.” Saying that there are too many hypocrites in the church is like saying that there are too many alcoholics in AA! The whole point of this is to make us less like ourselves and more like Jesus – one day at a time.

Giving is the way we do that. Generosity is the very best way to rid ourselves of the anxiety that leads to stupid mistakes, big and little lies, and hypocrisy. I’ve told you before that for me deciding to follow the Bible’s instruction to bring a full tithe to God – that is, give at least 10% of my income to God – was the best financial decision my family and I have ever made. No joke. It is life giving.

Next Sunday we will be dedicating our pledges for the coming year. Even if you have never made a pledge to God before in your life, I hope you will pray this week about doing so. I’m always willing to share my experience with you. Giving to God has deepened and enriched my spiritual life in ways that nothing else could. It’s given me a sense of power and freedom that only comes from giving God control of this crucial, financial aspect of my life.

So please, take that Step Chart home with you today, and pray for God’s guidance. What is it that God intends for you to do?

Bill Coffin, the late great pastor of the Riverside Church in New York, once said that when he went to worship on a Sunday morning and discovered that the pastor was going to preach a stewardship sermon, he would immediately bow his head and pray for brevity.

So here's the message, in a nutshell. This is joy and laughter Sunday. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! What better time could there be to count our blessings, thank God for the gift of our lives, the people we love, and above all else, for the grace and love of God who gives it all.

Next Sunday, when you come forward to place your card on the Lord's Table – making your pledge to God at whatever level you are able -- remember who you are – you are Barnabas, a Son or Daughter of Encouragement.

Let's pray together:

Giving God, there is nothing we have that does not come from you.

We belong to you; we have nothing apart from what you give.

Generosity is the way of those who call Christ our Lord,
who love Him with free hearts and serve him.

We are determined, by God's grace, to increase in generosity
until there is no needy person among us.

We are determined to be trustworthy with such a little thing
as money, that you may trust us with true riches of your glory.

Amen.