

UnExplainable

5. Authenticity

January 30-31, 2021

Obituaries usually say very nice things about the person who passed, no matter what kind of person they actually were. But every once in a while, someone writes one that comes across as real and even funny. For example, here are some excerpts from Tim Schrandt's obit:

Tim made his last inappropriate comment on March 29, 2019. If you are wondering if you may have ever met him, you didn't - because you WOULD remember. For those of you that did meet him, we apologize, as we're sure he probably offended you.

His position as "king" and orator was challenged by the nuns at St. Wenceslaus school in Spillville. ... We're not saying the nuns won, but they put up a good fight, and we mean literally - he got into a fist-fight with a nun. In fairness, she probably started it.

Tim's fondness for authority (his own - not others) followed him to South Winneshiek High School and later into the Army. This provided for many interesting episodes, detentions, and demotions, and a few "run ins" with the law.

Tim worked...as a tool and die maker for 30 plus years. Tim worked with many friends and "a bunch of morons". His words, not ours. Well not exactly his words, because that would have included a bunch of swear words.

Despite his crusty exterior, cutting remarks and stubbornness, there is actual evidence that he was a loving, giving and caring person. That evidence is the deep sorrow and pain in our hearts that his family feels from his passing.

For the record, he did not lose his battle with cancer. When he died, the cancer died too, so technically it was a tie! He was ready to meet his Maker, we're just not sure "The Maker" is ready to meet Tim.

I loved that obituary because it is not only is it funny, it is *real*. I feel like I got a little sense of what the guy was really like. There is something refreshing about authentic people.

When Jesus calls us to follow him, he calls us to an authentic life. He said "I am the way, the TRUTH..." There was nothing fake or pretend about Jesus, and to follow Jesus means to be real.

One of the signs that the Bible is from God is that it doesn't cover up the failures of its heroes. It gives us the good, the bad, and the ugly about people like Moses, David, Peter, and Paul.

Today we're going to see that the early church wasn't perfect, but it was authentic. And that made it attractive to others because authentic people create life-giving community.

Acts 5 gives us an unforgettable illustration of how important authenticity is to a healthy spiritual family.

Acts 5:1 - *Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property.*

Many of the early disciples sold property to support the poor. The verses just before this tells us Barnabas did that; so Ananias and his wife Sapphira might have been inspired by what he did and decided to do the same thing... except with one important difference:

Acts 5:2-4 *With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ⁴ Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."*

Ananias expected that people would admire and praise him when he gave his donation. He never expected that they confronted him about his lying instead.

We aren't told how Peter knew Ananias was lying. Someone might have told him, but my guess is that the Holy Spirit told Peter through a word of knowledge.

Notice, Peter was not upset that Ananias kept part of the money. Peter pointed out that Ananias could have kept the land; no one was pressuring him to donate it.

- v. 4 Didn't it belong to you before it was sold?

He could have donated part of the money and told the apostles that's what he was doing.

- And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal?

It was not a sin to sell the land and bring *part* of the proceeds to the church. The problem is that he lied and said he was donating 100% of what he received. He was trying to seem more generous than he really was. He was being deceptive.

Peter said that he lied to God when he lied to the leaders; because the Church is the Body of Christ. So, Ananias didn't honor God with his deception. Peter pointed out that "Satan filled your heart. Satan tempted Ananias to fake his generosity level, and Ananias allowed the enemy to win. And that carried drastic consequences.

Acts 5:5-10 *When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ⁶ Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.*

⁷ About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

"Yes," she said, "that is the price."

⁹ Peter said to her, “How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.”

¹⁰ At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

Wow – that is intense! This kind of instant judgment doesn't usually happen in the Bible – or in life. Most of the time individuals and nations who do wrong seem to get away with it for a long time. But Ananias and Sapphira fell over dead when they lied to the Church. Why? My sense is that the presence of God was so powerful among the believers during this time that lying to God couldn't coexist with the atmosphere of heaven.

A healthy body has an immune system that attacks and eliminates disease-causing bacteria and viruses. At that time, the Body of Christ was so healthy that elements foreign to the Kingdom of God were immediately neutralized. As soon as Ananias and Sapphira pretended to be something they weren't— it meant death - literally.

When we lie and pretend, something in us dies, too. Our bodies don't die, but some of the life goes out of our relationships, our self-confidence, and our confidence before God. For example, when the members of a small group aren't real with each other, it saps the life out of the group. But when members take the masks off, it's anything but boring.

Recently I was in a small group discussing what the scripture passage was saying to us. One member offered a few ideas, then abruptly shifted gears and shared a deep hurt that he was going through. We put aside the group questions and his pain became our agenda. We listened to him and prayed for him, and started to brainstorm practical ways to help. God was at work. If our friend had kept his pain to himself, he would not have received what he needed, we'd be less connected, and our group meeting would have been less real.

If we want the joy and vitality Jesus offers, we need authentic relationships with other followers. If we don't, Jesus' abundant life shrivels in us. God invites us into an authentic relationship with him – where we don't hide anything from him, we don't pretend to be something we're not.

If we want that kind of relationship with Christ, we need that kind of relationship with someone in the Body of Christ. We shouldn't tell everyone everything about us, but we do need at least one Christ-follower we can be honest with, and who will be honest with us.

Sometimes that is hard; why? Authenticity blockers: Fear of what people think.

In other words, pride. If I think my real self is not good enough, I'll cover it up. Ananias wanted people to admire him for his gift like they admired Barnabas after his.

He wanted people to think, “That Ananias is super generous; he must be really close to Jesus.” He figured that people knew the true level of his generosity they would not think as highly of him. So he lied.

We all want people to think well of us, and so we learn early on what to tell people and what not to tell people. Now, it is not wise or safe to tell everyone everything about us. But spiritually healthy people learn that there are things that we need to tell *someone*. And when you have a book-of-Acts kind of community with a few other believers, you have a way to do that.

A few years ago we bought our first house. Shortly afterwards, I noticed that the retaining wall in our backyard was moving. It was on a slope and it was slowly giving way. I had visions of my backyard sliding down the hill. For about a year I sought out options. The few repair quotes I got were tens of thousands of dollars we didn’t have. I was worried I’d made a big mistake and was stuck with it.

Finally, at small group one night, I told the group I was worried about the wall issue. Now, a big part of me didn’t want to tell them, because I was not proud of the fact that I was worried. I would rather have them think of me as a man of great faith. But it takes more energy to keep up appearances, so when they asked me how they could pray for me I told them about the wall. It only hurt a little. They prayed for me and the wall situation.

Just a couple of weeks later, Linda saw on a community forum someone recommend a wall contractor they had used. We called, and they were able to replace the wall at a much lower price and we were able to get it fixed. I was excited to tell the group about the answer to prayer, and I was very glad I told them.

When we are authentic, we make room for God’s power to work.

Another barrier to authenticity is Fear of accountability. Accountability means giving an account. When we get real, then we become accountable for our lives.

Peter asked Ananias to give an account, literally! He asked Ananias about what he had given and what he hadn’t. If Ananias had been willing to give an account, he would have grown spiritually. But he didn’t, and he died.

When we tell someone what’s going on in our lives, that can lead to growth. Dr. Gail Matthews found that people who write down goals AND then tell someone about them are twice as successful at reaching them as those who only write them down without telling anyone else. Why? Because just letting someone know increases your accountability. You know that if you tell people your goals, they’ll ask “How’s it going?”

We need others to ask us about our journey with Christ. You can boil down our group guide to two questions:

“What is God saying to you through this scripture?”

“What will you do about it?”

Then the next meeting we ask: “How did it go when you acted on the scripture?”

That basic rhythm makes us disciples who love and obey Jesus. That’s why I say that accountability is what turns a small groups discussion into a discipleship group. If all we do is talk, nothing happens. When we act, we grow.

Another barrier to authenticity is fear of confession. The scary part about accountability is that sometimes we'll have to admit we've failed. But that can lead to wholeness!

When Peter confronted Ananias about lying over the price, Ananias could have admitted what he had done. That would have changed the ending of this story. Ananias could have said, "You're right, Peter, I lied about the amount. Please forgive me." If he had confessed, he would have been forgiven. But he didn't, so he fell over dead.

When Peter asked Sapphira whether the price was accurate, he was giving her the chance to confess that it was a lie. But she didn't, so she died, too.

Sometimes we'd rather die than confess our sin. But confessing to others is not meant to humiliate us, it is to heal us!

James 5:16 *Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.*

When we're afraid of confessing our sins to someone else, let's ask ourselves, Would I rather be truly whole or just pretend to be whole? God can't change the sin we won't admit to.

There's an old phrase: You're only as sick as your secrets. The 12-step recovery process has helped millions break free of addictions. And authenticity and confession play an important part. For example, the first step is: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable." That's confessing reality.

Then step four: "Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Then step five: "Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs." That's confession, and it liberates!

If we are not disclosing what we are struggling with, what's keeping us from obeying Jesus, how we have followed Jesus, then we aren't growing. When it comes down to it, the biggest barrier to authenticity is fear. Yet, there is one type of fear that can help us stay real: Fear of sin can spur us to stay real.

Acts 5:11 *Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.*

The first believers feared when they saw what happened to Ananias and Sapphira when they sinned. That kind of fear was not a bad thing, because when we fear something, we stay away from it.

Parents' fear of their child being hurt prompt them to teach their preschooler not to wander into the street. Some people have a fear of cancer because it can kill. So they do what they can to avoid it.

And the Acts 5 church feared the deadly effects of sin, so they stayed away from it. Sin kills our spiritual health and our community, so a healthy fear of sin will prompt to do what can to avoid it.

John Wesley once said: *"Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or*

laymen; such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven on Earth.”

Let's take a moment in silence and ask the Holy Spirit to speak to us about what we might need to bring out in the open.