



From the Pulpit: November 7, 2021

All Saints' Day/Communion

The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Acts 5:1–11

The (Re)Birth of the Church, IX: Generosity

Like George Wishart said We are in the midst of Stewardship season and so for three weeks we are going to use The Book of Acts as our guide to look at generosity and what it means to be stewards.

Ananias and Sapphira

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.

Have you heard the one about the five word obituary? A widow, apparently salty about her long marriage to Bob, recently deceased, was asked by the funeral director to submit an obituary. She wrote down two words: Bob's dead. The funeral director looked up and said, "I'm sorry, the newspaper requires obituaries to be at least five words long." So, she takes her pen and tries again: Bob's dead. Car for Sale.

"It has to do with offering something precious, of great value, for the good of the community."

An obituary tells a story: demanding sparse language, it depicts a lifetime of love, or in Bob's case, love's opposite. Today's scripture passage is essentially the four word obituary of Ananias and Sapphira: They lied. They died. That's the only sketch we get of their long, human, likely complex shared life together. If the newspaper required more words, maybe we'd say: They lied. They

died. All were afraid.

This is a terrible passage. Two people die. Husband and wife. Within hours of each other. What trauma for Peter, who actually witnessed both deaths up close and personal, right after yelling at each of them. No wonder the community was afraid.

But if we are going to lean on the book of Acts as our sacred text in the middle of stewardship season, then we just can't ignore this story. It has to do with money, possessions, an attempt at reframing what we have as something beyond just "our own." It has to do with offering something precious, of great value, for the good of the community.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is a microcosm unto itself, a complexity, a multi pronged pericope, and to make matters just that much more complicated, beyond the story, here in this sanctuary, we are not only in the middle of stewardship season, in the midst of the strangest, longest pandemic season, but we are also about to welcome the mystery of the eucharist, a shared meal that ushers in the presence of God, and at the table, we will read the names of those who died in the last year, as is our tradition on the first Sunday of November when we celebrate All Saints' Day.

The intimacy of naming those we love will eclipse all else today. The act of naming will upstage sermon and sacrament, melody and message, because the names of those we love evoke more than any obituary ever could, and their name read aloud brings us close to them in ways we can barely muster language to describe.

So maybe one question this text bears for us today is: what does it mean to name Ananias and Sapphira today, among the community of the saints? What does it mean to name Bob among God's beloved, the one whose five word obituary lists his car for sale? What does it mean to carry within us loved ones whose imperfections are more potent than their good deeds? Maybe.

And maybe the question this text bears for us today is: in what ways are we like the early church, seized with fear? Was the fear because the death of Ananias and Sapphira came so quickly? Or was it because death and their great lie sat side by side? It sounds as if the bigger fear at the heart of this story is that this could be any of us. Any of us could be found out as imposters: people not living up to our own moral codes, less generous than we'd hoped, less kind, less compassionate. Maybe we're dishonest with ourselves and others in ways that threaten our own lives and lead us down a destructive path we can't quite face.

Or maybe the question is: why did they lie in the first place? Were they afraid they wouldn't be able to pay their kid's college tuition? Their medical bills? Buy the latest iPhone and keep up with the Joneses? Why not be honest and say they had a change of heart?

I've been digging around in this text for days and it seems more strange and murky the deeper I get. Don't lie. Yes. Maybe that's the heart of the message. But we've known that since we memorized the 10 commandments back in 3rd grade. And Yale Professor Willie James Jennings warns that the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira "should never be celebrated or treated flippantly as some morality case against lying to God." This is something deeper, about what it means to be human, to be community, to be vul-

nerable enough to step into the river of generosity (instead of the swamp of greed) and become partner to hope (instead of partner to dishonesty).

My instinct, of course, when considering the text, is to turn to the poets: you taught me that, Kenilworth Union. Barbara. Mei. Ann. Bill. Peter. Roger. Elaine. Leslie. And so many more of

you. Follow the poetry, you urge.

Environmental activist and Kentucky poet Wendell Berry says:

*When despair grows in me
And I wake in the middle of the night at the least sound
In fear of why my life and my children's lives may be
I go and lie down where the wood drake
Rests in his beauty on the water,
and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
Who do not tax their lives on forethought
Of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
Waiting for their light. For a time
I rest in the peace of the world, and I am free.¹*

Maybe Ananias and Sapphira, like us, spent years waking in the middle of the night, in fear of their lives and their children's lives. And finally they went down to the water, in early Christianity this was the water of baptism, and became immersed in the peace of Christian community, free from fear. But then as they sold their home and sought to make an even deeper commitment to that freedom, they became lost in multiple fears, taxed not just by Rome but by grief and panic. And the day-blind stars became too obscured to help them find their way.

"Any of us could
be found out as
imposters..."

¹ Wendell Berry. *The Peace of Wild Things And Other Poems*. Black Oak Books, 2018.

Or, what about Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes? He writes,

*Hold fast to dreams,
for if dreams die,
life is a broken-winged bird,
that cannot fly.*²

The book of Acts holds within it Langston Hughes' thread of dreams too, riffing off the ancient prophets saying "Your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams." Did Ananias and Sapphira catch a glimpse of that vision, that dream? And then suddenly shatter under the weight of it all? Their life becoming a broken-winged bird that cannot fly?

Or, maybe poet Gregory Orr, who grew up in the rural Hudson Valley in New York State can help? He says,

*to be alive; not just the carcass
But the spark.
That's crudely put but...
if we're not supposed to dance,
why all this music?*³

Did Ananias and Sapphira lose their spark along the way? Did they stop listening to the music? Go deaf to the song? Give up on the dance?

And then, there's English poet W. H. Auden. He says,

*All I have is a voice to undo the folded lie...
we must love one another or die.*⁴

Did Auden read the story of Ananias and Sapphira before writing this line of poetry? He seems to imply that the two of them could have unfolded the lie. They could have used their voice to walk backwards from their plot to deceive. They could have found a way for words to reveal their own fear of generosity and been honest with Peter about their questions of how to proceed.

Generosity does not happen in a vacuum. It happens in relationship. Husband to wife. Father to son. Grandmother to granddaughter. Generations of generosity impacting this moment. Generosity, resource sharing, philanthropy, stewardship, is God-infused work, freedom-infused work, a sacred conversation between you and the one in whom you live and move and have your being. If there is a "should" behind your generosity, if your gift is coerced, if freedom is lost on the way to the offering plate, then go back and listen to God again. Generosity is freedom. Our ability to share, to give, to let go is a gift of the Spirit. Generosity is a gift from God.

"This is something deeper, about what it means to be human, to be community, to be vulnerable enough to step into the river of generosity"

On All Saints' Day, we remember the unbroken generosity of those who have gone before us. Their obituaries were littered with love that was rooted in this kind of freedom to love in tangible ways. On All Saints' Day, we remember the way they taught us to live more generously, more gently, more compassionately. We let their love linger in our midst, the tears on our cheek, the lump in our throat, a reminder of their wide spirit of love.

I will leave you with one final quote. From an ancient text boring enough to make Bill Evertsberg tremble with fear (Katie, you wouldn't use the Didache in your sermon would you? Really?) It says: "If we are partners in the eternal, how are we not to be partners even more in that which perishes?"⁵ May we live generously, in the freedom of God's love. Amen.

² Arnold Rampersad, ed. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Vintage Classics: New York, 1995.

³ Gregory Orr, *Concerning the Book that is the Body of the Beloved*. Copper Canyon Press. 2012.

⁴ W. H. Auden, "September 1, 1939" *Another Time*. Random House, 1940.

⁵ Aaron Milavec. *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary*. Liturgical Press, 2016.

—The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving—
By The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

It is truly right and our greatest joy to give you thanks and praise, O Lord our God, creator and ruler of the universe. We praise you for saints and martyrs, for the faithful in every age who have followed your son and witnessed to his resurrection. From every race and tongue, and from every people and nation, you have gathered them into your kingdom. You have shown them the path of life and filled them with the joy of your presence.

Gracious God, we ask that you will be close in an intimate and powerful way for all those among us who need an extraordinary measure of your grace just now.

We pray for those who have recently lost someone dearer than life itself, to virus, to cancer, to dementia, to great age. Surround them with the palpable presence of your Holy Spirit, and also with companions to walk the way with them through the darkness of grief.

We pray for those who have lost the joy of living, through depression or disappointment or ill health.

We pray for those who are lonely or friendless. Open our eyes to their need for love and companionship or just a listening ear.

We pray for families riven by conflict or misunderstanding between husband and wife, parent and child, or brother and sister. Send your spirit of reconciliation to that place, that empathy and selflessness might come back into those homes.

Lord, on this sacred day in the life of our congregation, unite us at the table of our Lord with the saints of our own fellowship who have passed beyond to the Church triumphant. We remember their witness:

Virginia Anderson, Robert Balsley, Jackie Barnes, Joyce Bishop, Wiley Caldwell, Bill Folland, Suzanne Garvin, Charles A. Kelly, William J. Kirby, Jim Kleinops, Cliff Krueger, Coraine (Co) McArthur, Florence (Florri) McMillan, Connie Mehn, Barbara Mengel, Frances Pellouchoud, Pam Ross, Barbara Seibel, Ned Smith, Tiffany Wentz, Charles G. Whitchurch, and Judy Wright.

Blessed are the dead who die in the spirit, for they rest from their labors, and their works follow them.

Number us among your saints, O God, and join us with the faithful of every age, that strengthened by their witness and supported by their fellowship, we may run with perseverance the race that is set before us, and may with them receive the unfading crown of glory when we stand before your throne of grace.

Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor are yours, Almighty God, now and forevermore.