

## Eastminster Worship Services

Sunday, July 12, 2009

### Faith Factor

#### **“Discernment”**

Acts 5:1-11

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Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. <sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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? <sup>4</sup> 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 to men but to God.”

<sup>5</sup> When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. <sup>6</sup> Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

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

“Yes,” she said, “that is the price.”

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

<sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. (Acts 5:1-11)

### **Introduction**

Let me put your minds at ease: We are not handing out pledge cards today.

We are in the sixth week of our series entitled *Faith Factor*. Throughout the summer, we’ve talked about boldness as Christians, about devotion, forthrightness, confidence, courage, and today...discernment.

There are two levels of discernment. Peter had the spiritual gift of discernment, which “enables a Christian to distinguish between holy and unholy spirits through the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>1</sup> He was able to look at Ananias and Sapphira and tell that Satan had filled their hearts, that there was evil at work in their lives.

Not everyone has this gift. But we all can tell when we are truthful and when we are lying. We know when we are being genuine or two-faced. And we can discern it in others, through not just words but body language and tone of voice.

This has implications for Christian community. When we are sincere and authentic, it fosters the sharing and

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.answers.com/topic/discernment>

closeness described in the first few chapters of Acts. When we are hypocritical and judgmental, everyone takes a step back and we live in cautious, guarded community. That is what the early church was in danger of at the beginning of chapter five.

### *Context of Passage*

This is an uncomfortable passage because it shows us a part of God's nature that we don't like. We want blessing, but we're not so keen on divine judgment. And frankly, this passage seems like a lightning strike. In chapter two, the Holy Spirit has filled the hearts of the believers. Each day more are added to their number. Peter heals a man, people are filled with awe, the Sanhedrin is filled with dread and orders them to stop. But instead, they become bolder.

Generosity abounds. At the end of Acts 4, a man named Joseph sells a field and brings the money to the apostles to distribute to the needy as they see fit. He is not looking for praise; he doesn't do it to get noticed.

But Ananias and Sapphira notice. And they hatch a plan. They sell property and Ananias gives some of the money to the apostles. We do not see the exchange in scripture, but somehow he gives the impression he is giving the full amount. Peter sees Ananias' heart, discerns that he is deceiving them, and accuses him of lying not to man but to God. And Ananias dies. Then Sapphira comes in and backs her husband's story. And she dies. The early church is seized with fear. What just happened? Why? What does it mean?

### *What Is This Really About?*

This passage is not about money. It is about authenticity. Acts 4 says that the believers shared everything they had. Voluntarily. As an outpouring of gratitude toward God and love toward one another. Nowhere does it mandate the selling of property or the surrender of everything to the church. Joseph chose to sell land and give all of the money.

Ananias and Sapphira mimicked his example...almost. They were not filled with the Spirit, but with pride. They wanted to be seen as righteous, but didn't want to *be* righteous. They wanted to be seen as holy, but didn't want to *pursue* holiness. As long as they looked good on the outside, what was happening on the inside didn't matter. So they thought.

God saw this and dealt with it swiftly and starkly. He used them as an example, just as He did with the Flood, where all but a few were destroyed; and with Achan in the book of Joshua, where his entire family perished on account of his sin. In each example, God taught a lesson at the first occurrence of the sin and then moved on in grace and spared others.

That's the best answer I found for why this happened, but admittedly, I am uncomfortable. Didn't Christ's death and resurrection ensure that this kind of thing wouldn't happen? Why did God choose to make an example of them – certainly there were other liars in the early church? Why did *they* die but murderous Saul – who persecuted the church and approved of the killing of Christians – was converted into the apostle Paul? It doesn't seem fair.

But nowhere does it say that God treated everyone alike. And nowhere does it say that sin doesn't have consequences. Yes, Christ died for us so that our sin doesn't land us in hell. But I think we assume that in

forgiveness, God just waves off our sin as though it is no big deal. How seriously do we take our sinfulness – that when we sin, we turn away from the One who loves us unconditionally? How seriously do we take repentance? How seriously do we pursue holiness? Do we figure that because Jesus died for us, we can just sin all we want because hey...we're covered?

Ananias and Sapphira laughed in the face of God, testing Him, infecting the early church. Praise God He doesn't deal with us in the same way. Because who among us hasn't lied to look good in the eyes of others? Who hasn't claimed to be just a little more righteous than we really are? Who hasn't made bad decisions because of pride? And what does that do to Christian community, when we choose hypocrisy over authenticity?

### *What Does Hypocrisy Look Like?*

A hypocrite, according to author Francis Frangipane, "is a person who excuses his own sin while condemning the sins of another. A hypocrite also...[pretends] a righteousness he fails to live."<sup>2</sup>

Did you notice that Peter judged Ananias' behavior to be wrong because it did not line up with the Word of God, but he did not pass judgment on him? Peter remembered when he proclaimed three times, "I don't know him" as Jesus was being tried and beaten and spit on. He realized that he, too, was a sinner, and had no right to condemn another.

How do we react when we hear that one of our brothers or sisters has gotten tangled in sin? We may show some sympathy, we may offer prayer, but sometimes we stand just a little bit taller, and say, "Well, at least I've never done that." Are you likely to ask for help from someone who is peering around the plank in their eye to glare at the speck in yours? Probably not. When we treat each other this way, our natural instinct is to step back and isolate ourselves, which means we're less likely to get the care and accountability we need when we sin. Far cry from Pentecost, don't you think?

How do we respond when we hear of another's struggles? Chemo. Surgery. Broken bone. Generally we respond with support. What about troubled marriage, depression, divorce, alcoholism, anorexia, drug abuse, suicide attempt, fill in the blank. How many come to worship dying inside but smile and say, "I'm fine, thank you, how are you?"...because they are afraid of being the focus of gossip if they share what is really going on. Far cry from Pentecost, don't you think?

When we are hypocritical, when we set up our own standards and expect people to meet them and judge them if they don't, when we pretend to be someone we aren't, others step back from us and don't trust us. And when we discern that others are doing it, we take a step back. Pretty soon we are standing across the room from each other, as strangers.

Do we see how this infects the body of Christ and instead of this warm fellowship of believers, we become a sanitized and careful? And do we see how that affects non-believers, who are looking in from the outside saying, "Why would I want to be part of that?"

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<sup>2</sup>Francis Frangipane, *Holiness, Truth, and the Presence of God*, pp 9-10

### *Authenticity*

Acts 2:42-47 – *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.*

*Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

This community thrived because the members of the body were honest, authentic, trustworthy and selfless. They devoted themselves not to their own wants but to the Word of God and the fellowship of the people. They considered people more important than possessions. There wasn't as much a "mine" and "yours" as "ours." And those on the outside looking in liked what they saw. They said, "I want to be a part of that."

Ananias and Sapphira were not honest with God, themselves, or the apostles, and it threatened to unravel this tight-knit group. We threaten the body when we refuse to acknowledge the truth of who God is, who we are, and who we are with. We build up the body when we are willing to seek truth in all three areas.

#### *Who do we think God is?*

Ananias and Sapphira did not take Him seriously. They did not repent of pride when they found themselves scheming; instead, thought they could lie and God wouldn't notice, or that He wouldn't care.

Don't we do that sometimes? Don't we sometimes act as though our salvation does not just get us into heaven, but also absolves us from consequences of our actions? I'm forgiven, so I can do whatever I want? I'll just come back and confess every Sunday. That's why Christ came, right?

True confession of sin is agreeing with God that what we are doing is wrong, and then realigning our hearts and minds to His will. He extends grace over and over and over not because we deserve it, but because He loves us.

We have life because Jesus Christ gave his life for us. We have forgiveness because Jesus took our sins upon him. And in return, we are called to follow him, and he means it. He wants all of us. He designed the world so that we get to participate in bringing other people to Christ and encouraging them in their walk. And people are drawn to others who are honest and genuine. One of the reasons Peter was such an effective evangelist is because he was aware of his sin, did not take his salvation or forgiveness for granted, and took seriously and proclaimed boldly who Jesus was.

Where are you with God right now? Where are you pretending? Because he can see right through every one of us. He takes our sin seriously, and wants us to repent and turn to Him...where He will be waiting with open arms.

#### *Who do we think we are?*

Ananias and Sapphira were not content with who they were or what they could offer, so they tried to pretend. Children pretend because it is a part of their creativity and imagination – I've seen pictures of a princess, Superman, and Batman all having a tea party together. Now *that* is unity.

But when do we act like Superman or Superwoman, pretending we can do anything through ourselves who give us strength? When do we act like the grow-up prince or princess, expecting others to wait on us? When we put on costumes and masks as adults so that people can't see our real selves, it's because we don't feel that we are good enough, or righteous enough as we are.

God knows who we are and gave us the gifts we have – and each one of us has slightly different gifts and He intended that! He isn't asking us to pretend to be someone we're not – He wants us the way we are! He is asking us to give Him all that we are so that He can shape us and mold us. We don't have to look for a mold and try to shove ourselves into it.

The poor woman who put two copper coins in the treasury in Luke 21 is worth as much to God as Joseph who sold his entire field in Acts 4. Because He doesn't base His love for us on what we do, how much we achieve, or how good of a job we do compared to someone else. He loves us for who we are, right now...in our brokenness and sins and struggles. We are fearfully and wonderfully made, knit together in our mothers' wombs, made in the image of God. When we accept that, and are content with who we are, we stop trying to be someone else.

*Who do we think they are?*

Just as He loves us unconditionally, do we realize that He loves the broken person sitting next to us, or in front of us, or three pews away from us just as much? When we pass judgment, we have set up our own standards of who people should be, how they should act, what they should wear, which struggles are okay for them to have, and probably a dozen other filters...and then we measure people against those standards. And we treat people well or badly based on how they live up to *our* expectations.

When we repent of those standards and begin to pull down the scaffolding we so carefully built, we begin to replace hypocrisy with authenticity. We begin to reach out to those whom we used to consider wrong or bad. Instead of "those people," it becomes "my brother or sister." And when we reach out to an unbeliever and show love when he or she is expecting judgment, expect the Holy Spirit to begin moving.

### *Closing*

I'd like to close with a story I heard in a Bible study several years ago. A deacon of a small church named Ray was arrested for drug dealing, something he had kept well-hidden from the congregation. He was sentenced to a year in jail. Another member, who was a friend of Ray's, had been hearing a lot of gossip. He stood up one Sunday and said, "Ray's family doesn't want to come to church anymore because they feel judged. Ray himself is afraid of what we all think about him."

Church members realized they had a choice – they could keep peering around the plank in their own eye to glare at the speck in Ray's, or they could encourage and support him. They reached out to his family. They began visiting and sending cards. The gossip stopped, and the prayers began. A few months later, Ray gained permission from the warden to start a Bible study. The church provided study Bibles. When Ray said that most of these men had not received so much as a postcard or visit from family, the church adopted them as well.

After Ray got out of jail, he rejoined his family in worship, and when he stood up during prayer time to thank

everyone for their support, people spontaneously stood and applauded. Eventually, two other men from the Bible study joined him at church, professed their faith, and were baptized. As far as I know, they are all still actively involved.

The church chose to move from, "I can't believe we let that man be a deacon" to "we're praying for our brother Ray." And believers were added to their number.

Let us pray:

Holy and Loving God, we confess that too often we sit in the judgment seat rather than kneel with our brother or sister in prayer. Open our hearts and minds and identify where we take you for granted, where we pass judgment on one another, where we don't see ourselves in the proper light. Encourage us to be real with each other, to abide with one another, to bear one another's burdens, to encourage each other, to hold each other accountable, and especially to love you and love one another. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.