

Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5)

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Date: 29 May 2022

Preacher: Bekki Fahrer

[0 : 0 0] Thank you for listening to the Table Church podcast. The Table Church is a justice-oriented, inclusive community of folks who are doing their best to thoughtfully and authentically follow the way of Jesus.

We are currently in a sermon series on the Book of Acts. This week, elder and preaching team member Becky Fair will be guiding us through the pretty difficult story of Ananias and Sapphira.

If you want to support our efforts to declare a more beautiful gospel, we invite you to partner with us financially by going to thetablechurch.org slash give. Thanks so much again for joining us.

Let's dig in. Hi, my name is Becky Fair. I am one of the elder team here at the Table Church, and I'm on the preaching team. And today I get to talk to you a little bit about the church and acts, she, her, her pronouns.

And I just want to give a shout out before I get started to the group that came to the Merida and Hill Malcolm X meetup this morning. We had a great conversation. It was good getting to know some people, getting some perspectives on community and what is important.

[1 : 0 8] I think this is a really vital conversation for us to be having. So I'm glad to be able to do that with you here via this podcast slash video this morning.

Um, but it's something I want to make sure that we continue to do, and we're going to be continuing to do it as the church is going through the book of Acts. Um, because part of what we're doing is, is having this question of what is community meant to be, especially community around Jesus and around faith doing life together.

So as we've been going through this book of Acts, we've been centering our sermons around this early church, which is the first sort of generation of people who, after Jesus was here, was trying to do life together in a faith community effectively.

I want to shout out to Res City for their loving takeover of our church service last week and how they helped us center and understand and look in the conversation of Peter and John and the person who was lame at the temple.

In this conversation, we've been asking ourselves questions of what was this early church doing and what is it that we can take from that to inform the way that we do community together.

[2 : 2 3] And so this week's scripture is going to be sort of taking over just from the point where last week left off. So I'll give us a little bit of a context to that. And then we're going to get kind of into a hard conversation.

Um, there are a fair amount of scriptures in the Bible that I'm like, oh, I really like this or makes me think or I get like really excited about seeing lived out.

And then there are some that I'm just like, I guess I just read that. I can't believe I just read that. Uh, there are some really fun ones.

Um, most of them are in the Old Testament, but occasionally they pop up in the New Testament like the one we're going to talk about today. And I want to just preface everything by just saying like, I know, and I have sat through this scripture being used in some pretty devastating ways throughout the Western church.

It's been used, um, to cause fear, to shame people, to control people's behaviors. And I'm going to try really hard not to do that today.

[3 : 26] I want you all to know as we're going in here. Yes, I read commentaries. Yes, I listened to what other people are saying, but a lot of this is what I have come to in my life. And so I really want you to be able to engage with me on this.

Obviously we can't in this setting right here, but if you have questions about it, or you are not quite sure you agree, then let's talk about it. Let's, let's get into this together because, um, we all are vessels of the Holy Spirit.

So we all can learn and interpret what scripture says. Um, I also just acknowledge that there are some things about the story that I don't fully understand. And just because I give you my perspective doesn't mean it's the only perspective.

And so there are other voices that could read this differently. Um, and it's important to know that. After giving you all those comments, I do also want to say, I think this important, this story is an important one as we talk about what kind of community we build and what we owe each other in this community.

I know that's a question that everybody's heard from the good place, which I highly recommend you watch if you haven't. But Tim Scanlon's question is an important one when we are existing together in community, whether it is a chosen community of faith, whether it's a family community, whether it's in a neighborhood or workplace community, what do we owe to one another?

[4 : 52] Or what should we be bringing to this space that allows us to live together? Well, it allows us to be our full selves. So with that in mind, let's go into the scripture.

So I'm going to be working from Acts 4 and Acts 5, and it's a rather large scripture. So I'm going to do a fair amount of paraphrasing so that we are not just spending all day just reading the Bible, but talking about it too.

And last week we had this story that Res City so lovingly put together for us where Peter and John went to the temple to pray. And when they were there, they met this man who had been lame from birth and he asked them for money, for alms, for assistance.

And they said, we don't have money, but we do have something. So in the name of Jesus Christ, get up and walk. And so we're going to pick up right after that because people were pretty astounded by seeing this man who was in his forties, who had never walked, suddenly walking around and jumping for joy.

And they were asking Peter and John about it, who started speaking to the people about who Jesus was and how he died and how he was resurrected and this community that was being formed around him.

[6 : 10] And the high priest and the Sadducees heard this and they wanted to stop whatever was happening and arrested Peter and John. But it was kind of too late.

The scriptures tell us at that time that about 5,000 people believed the story and were getting on board with what this new community under Jesus was about. So the next day, Peter and John were pulled from prison out before the high priest and they were asked by the high priest and the Sadducees and the rulers, by what power did you do this?

Under whose name are you doing this? Like, what is the authority behind what you're doing? And Peter gets all filled with the Holy Spirit. And he tells them, you mean this man who was lame and who has been healed?

Let me tell you about this. It is about Jesus, who you crucified and then God raised from the dead. And then he went on to tell him about, you rejected him, but he is the cornerstone of what God is doing and building.

And all these high priests and rulers were astonished, but made a real note. Um, these are uneducated, common men.

[7 : 30] Direct quote right there. But they couldn't do anything about it because right there in their midst was the man who had healed, been healed. And so many people were praising God because of the healing that took place.

They couldn't stand up in opposition to it. So instead they tried to mitigate the flow and the spread of this gospel that Peter and John were telling him. And they said, you cannot talk about this anymore.

And Peter says, look, it is up to you to judge whether I should listen to God or I should listen to man. But let me tell you, I'm going to tell you about what I saw. I tell people about what I saw, what I see God doing. And, and even though they were admonished even more, Peter and John were released.

So they went back to the believers and told them this whole story. And the community of believers, this just strengthened their boldness and their faith.

And one of the outgrowings of the faith is that they were becoming of one heart and one mind. So there was this community of believers that the Holy Spirit was empowering that was becoming united.

[8 : 39] They didn't hold onto things that they were owned, but they had everything in common. There wasn't a needy person among them because people in the community began selling things that they didn't need and bringing those proceeds to the apostles.

And then they got distributed as they needed throughout the community. And in this story, at the end of chapter four, there is this man named Joseph, whom everybody called Barnabas. And Barnabas went out and sold a field and he brought the proceeds back and laid it at the apostles' feet.

They gave him like a good couple of lines in this chapter about how Barnabas did this thing. Then the story gets tricky. I'm going to pause here for just a moment to give you some background of how I'm viewing this story and how I am approaching this passage.

One of the first things I asked is, what is the book of Acts meant to be? Is it meant to be this explicit blueprint or roadmap of exactly how we're supposed to do church today?

When I was about 12, there were some good friends of our family that decided to join a Hutterite brethren community. Now, I'd never heard of this before, but the Hutterites were a group of people who were doing their best to live as explicitly as the Acts community said they should.

[10 : 06] So they were a community that came together. Everybody held everything in common. They lived together. They had like a whole plot of land that belongs to all of them.

They all worked the land. They worked in community with one another. They lived together. They ate together. They celebrated together. They mourned together. All of that existed inside this communal space.

Nobody had their own savings accounts. Nobody kept their own money. It was all pooled into this one space. And I remember asking my mom all kinds of questions about this, and I just could not wrap my head around it.

And I came from a fairly community-driven stream of faith. But I just couldn't understand how you would go somewhere and nothing would be yours. Like, not your own books, not your own toys, not your own clothes.

And I remember asking my mom, even their underpants? Like, I could not comprehend holding nothing in common and what that lack of boundary might look like.

[11 : 06] I think that, you know, preteen Becky was also struggling with some of the things that I struggle today. I see this story in Acts or these stories in Acts of this early church.

And I think this is a great community, a great thing to be building. But their society and our society don't look the same. The needs in their community don't necessarily look like the needs in ours.

So is this meant to be a blueprint and a roadmap? Or is this the story of the first experiment about how to do life together centered around Jesus, fueled by the Holy Spirit?

Is this meant to be informative or is it meant to be prescriptive? And I come down on the former. I think this is the first example of how Christian faith was lived out in community.

And what we can draw from this, what we can learn from this is some of the lessons that they learned, some of the things that they wrestled with, and some of the principles that held them true to what God was asking of them.

[12 : 15] And then we can look at how does that work in our, in our world today? So I'm looking to this scripture to try and see what should inform from this story, what should inform how my world lives today?

And I also am using the lens of context. I'm also looking at this iteration of God being at the center of community. So when God first came to the Hebrew people and, and was living in their midst, it was different.

Like instead of temples being on the outskirts or something like that, like what happens is God was very physically present with his people when he was taking them out of exile. It was a pillar of cloud by day, a pillar of fire at night in the center of the community.

And here again is this time when the very presence of God is at the center.

So the Holy Spirit came, amazing things happened among the believers that were waiting. And now the Holy Spirit is the driving force, the center principle of this community that's being built together.

[13 : 29] And finally, the last lens that I'm kind of using or perspective I'm kind of using as I'm looking at this is seeing this as one of the fulfillments of the Abrahamic promise.

Now, um, back in the old Testament, when God first came to Abraham, he said, I'm going to bless you so that through you, all the nations of the world to be blessed. And through God's iteration of interactions with the Hebrew people, God continually called God's people back to this understanding that this is meant for all people.

It doesn't just exist in this space, that the temple is to be a house of prayer for all nations, that all are to be included in this blessing and in this promise. And God enacted or put in place a system, the Jubilee system by which systems of power were disrupted on a regular basis.

So it's back in one of those really fun books, um, where you, when you try to read the Bible from beginning to end, you get really bogged down by all the rules. God talks about at the seventh year, you let the fields run fallow and you do all these things.

And, and, and at the seventh, seventh year, it's the year of Jubilee. It's preparation because next year, 50th year is the year of Jubilee. And the year Jubilee is meant to be this time where all the systems of power and injustice get disrupted and things get put back on an even keel.

[14 : 54] So if you had land that was your inheritance and you had to sell it to, um, provide for your family at the year Jubilee, that reverts back to your ownership. Again, people who were in bondage or enslaved were to be released and released with things to help them be successful and live a happy and full life on their own.

Debts were to be forgiven. It didn't matter how much the debt was. And the year Jubilee was supposed to be forgiven. There are a whole bunch of things along that line about how we deal with our world, how we deal with money, how we deal with people, how we deal with inheritance and property.

And all of it was about resetting systems of power and systems of elitism and, and, um, control and bringing it back into a new order.

And the, the Israeli people never fully ever did Jubilee the way it was outlined. And when Jesus came, Jesus started his ministry by reading the scripture in Isaiah, which was essentially describing the Jubilee year.

He's like this spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me. And he just lists all these things to, um, comfort those who mourn, to lose the chains of injustice, to bind up the brokenhearted, to release from captive prisoners, to restore, to renew, like this is the year of the Lord.

[16 : 28] And I think this church, this acts church centered around who Jesus was led by the Holy spirit was meant to be living the Jubilee promise and doing all these things that were changing the status quo, speaking to systems of power and injustice, comforting, providing, restoring.

So looking at this, we see this in play in this scripture. So much so that the leaders of this new church movement, Peter and John are arrested for healing a man.

And the only thing that the priests and rulers can hold against him in this moment is that they're uneducated and common. It's this entrenched elitism and the faith community with the Holy spirit at the center is challenging those systems of injustice and control.

And they are beginning to do things like giving of themselves so that no one has any need providing for one another again, living this Jubilee life.

And then we come to a couple, Ananias and Sapphira. They are two members of this fledgling movement.

[17 : 53] So here's their story. And I'm going to just acknowledge upfront that this is a hard story. And there are some things in here that are difficult to sit with.

And I know the story has been used to shame people. I'm going to tell it and I'm going to try to unpack it a little bit. So Ananias and Sapphira also have a field that's in their possession like Barnabas previously.

So they go sell it. But before they bring that money to the apostles, they decide among themselves. They make the decision that they're going to hold a portion of that back and they are going to give the remainder.

But they're going to tell the apostles that that's the full amount. So Ananias comes in and he brings this gift and lets it be at Peter's feet.

And now I got to interject here a little moment from my own life because I kind of read this Peter. I think I read my dad. So there was this time in my life where we had somebody living in our house when I was younger, like 9 and 10.

[19 : 04] And I was very fascinated with this person. And so I would go up to her room when she was at work and nose around. And one of the things that she had was a box of chocolates. And I was like, so every once in a while when I go up, I just steal a chocolate because that would make me very exciting.

And I felt a little clandestine and all that kind of good stuff. Well, this person brought it to the attention of my parents that somebody had been going into her room and somebody had been eating her chocolate. My brother was young enough and enough of a hurricane that there would be no way that he could just go in and just steal a chocolate.

There would be mayhem. And my sister was the kind of person that if you confronted her with something that she did, she would A, burst into tears and B, completely own up to it because she felt so guilty.

So when they asked my sister and she had nothing to do with it, kind of narrowed it down as to who was the little chocolate stealer. So they came to me and said, Becky, you know, these chocolates are missing.

And I, sadly, one of the gifts that I have in life is that I'm a really good liar. And very plausibly was like, why would I go to the room?

[20 : 13] Chocolates? What kind of chocolates? Totally plausible. My mother was very much like, I know she did it. I know she did it. I want to punish her. And my dad was like, you know, Becky, I want to believe you.

But something in my spirit doesn't sit right. So I'm going to go talk to God about this for a little bit. I mean, wise parenting. I was also sitting in my room going, expletive, expletive.

God is going to tell my dad I lied and then I'm really going to get in trouble. But my dad isn't like somebody who plays games. Like he legitimately was. Something isn't sitting right. I'm going to go think on it.

And when I read Peter, I read Peter in my dad's voice. That something in his spirit wasn't sitting right in this situation. And so he asks Ananias, why?

Why? Why did you let Satan do this? Was this not your field to do with what you wanted to do? And then once you sold it, was that not your money to do with what you wanted to do?

[21 : 23] Why did you lie to the Holy Spirit about this? And then Ananias falls over and he breathes his last.

And the young men of the church community come in and they wrap him up. And they take him out and they bury him. And then a little later, Sapphira comes in.

It's actually said three hours later she comes in. She has no idea what's happened to her husband. And Peter asks her, Sapphira, is this the money you got for the field?

And she said, yes, of course it is. And Peter said, why? Why did you conspire to lie to the Holy Spirit? To test the Holy Spirit this way?

Even now, the feet of the men who have buried your husband are right outside the door. And then Sapphira, she breathes her last.

[22 : 27] And she's laid to rest by her husband. And the community, this spreads to the community with a great amount of fear. Now I'm going to just start by saying, as I read this story, the very human me has a lot of compassion.

Or at least some compassion for Ananias and Sapphira. I mean, especially, this is a fledgling community. It is brand spanking new. Like the amount of trust that would have to go into trusting this community with my money, let alone money that could possibly have been from land that was my inheritance, which is meant to care for me.

Selling it and giving it to an experiment just requires a lot of trust. Trust that that community is going to provide for me when I need it. It's still a very new thing.

And many of us, myself included, know what it's like to be a part of a faith community that fails us. Some of us know what it's like to be a part of a faith community that did the failing. And we know how people can other us in our community, see us as less than, or even as an abomination.

So we can kind of empathize with not feeling like we can trust a community to be what it says it is. And we can't believe in our community to be choosing to make ourselves vulnerable to that community.

[23 : 54] But, there's a big but here. Don't think that Ananias and Sapphira were just trying to protect themselves.

Because there was more at play here. And I think there's something about the nature of community that's important. Community doesn't just exist for what I get from it.

But community exists because we all are. And we exist because community.

Community sustains us too. In fact, in many communities that are not Western philosophy-driven communities, there's different understandings of what community looks like.

One of them being this concept of Ubuntu. So, this has slightly different names depending on where in the continent of Africa you encounter it.

[24 : 54] But it's an idea that the individual just cannot exist alone. That whatever happens in the individual happens to the whole group. And there's this Kenyan philosopher, John S. Mbiti.

And he says, the individual can only say, I am because we are. And since we are, therefore I am.

And this concept of Ubuntu and this understanding of community, something I want us to hold with us as we talk about this story. Because just as it can be vulnerable to trust a community, we hold that intention with the understanding that communities can sustain us.

And that our well-being also depends on community. And that it is important for us to thrive so that the community can thrive. And it is important for the community to thrive so that we can thrive.

And this interdependence allows us to be present for one another. Just as we are vulnerable to allow others to be present for us. So Ananias and Sapphira were a part of this experimental interdependent community with the Holy Spirit leading and guiding.

[26 : 11] And people started to give and needs were met. And they started to sell items and bring them to the apostles.

And seeing this happen and seeing people be honored for making that choice. Ananias and Sapphira decided to do the same. But they made this agreement together not to give it all.

Which in and of itself is not a problem. Not a problem. They could have given only a portion of that field's earnings. And that would have been fine. They were not required to give.

Not by God. Not by Peter and the apostles. They were not required to sell the field. Not by God. Not by Peter and the apostles. And they were not required to give all the money.

Not by God. Not by the community. Not by the apostles. Peter said it. Was this field not yours? That you get to choose what you want to do with it?

[27 : 15] Was this money not yours? That you got to choose? Why did you lie to God? And when Sapphira comes in three hours later.

And note here that Peter doesn't treat her like an underling or a less than. He treats her like an equal. Which is kind of an amazing thing. Speaking of the roles women used to play in that society.

And building a jubilee kingdom. Peter asks her. Was this how much you sold the property for? And when she said yes. He asked her. Why did you conspire to test the Holy Spirit?

I'm going to take a minute to acknowledge that this is where it gets rough for me. It is really hard sometimes for me to acknowledge a God. Who is loving. Who can take me as I am.

And take what I struggle with. And say. Being a part of this story that involves death. After lying to the Holy Spirit.

[28 : 22] It's hard. I don't know that I have an answer for that. So I'm just going to be honest about that. But I am going to go back to this point.

If it isn't the money. Then what was the problem? The lying? I mean.

It happened. Not so much. I think it's deeper than that. So this community. It was being known as one that had one heart and one soul.

And they tell the story of Barnabas selling the field and buying it. And it's noteworthy. It has several lines in the story. And it wasn't in Ananias and Sapphira's head.

I don't know what they were thinking. I'm not sure if there was some self-preservation or greed or what motivated them. But what they were expecting was to get the honor or the attributed righteousness of this sacrificing gift to the community without the reality of the sacrifice.

[29 : 26] It seems to me that they wanted the prestige of being significant without completely earning it. And in a community that was trying to upset power dynamics and injustice, Ananias and Sapphira seemed to be doing the opposite.

Because what happens to a community when the representatives of the Holy Spirit, the apostles and the people there, bless this gift that wasn't being completely true, it undermines the credibility of the community and what the Holy Spirit is working among them to build.

Because what kind of community would be built if Ananias and Sapphira's actions were condoned or even honored? That I can keep the appearance of wholehearted vulnerability and sacrifice within a community without actually living it?

That the very systems of injustice that the community was working to address and to tear down, that would become entrenched. Because people who could get away with it could get honor and not live up to that.

It shifts the community from where we meet each other's needs to a community where power and wealth have more value.

[30 : 51] And the thing is, like, this self-preservation of power and prestige has a cost.

It costs the integrity of the community. It costs where the movement goes in the generations. And as we see in this story, It costs the individual.

Because if I am because we are. And we are because I am. If what I'm doing is infectious and unjust, what does that build through our communal space?

We have examples of this all over the place in the Western Church today. Where we place the veneer of righteousness on systems that keep our power intact and the community suffers.

This week has been a week of horrors. And quite honestly, I am exhausted. As I'm sure many of us all can just weary of this. But just one of those pieces was the report released about the Southern Baptist Convention.

[32 : 13] About sexual assault by people with leadership. Over decades, decisions were made to keep sexual assaults and predation hidden in order to maintain the appearance of righteousness.

The pastors and leaders were moved from church to church. People were moved notified. No disciplinary measures happened. And it led to so many people.

Many, many, many people being harmed. And communities being harmed. And fundamentally, it undermines the entire institution.

We see this in many other ways. How purity and culture and complementarianism are enshrining systems of control and calling it holiness.

The Western Church has justified war and persecution and slavery and segregation and abuse and much more under a guise of righteousness.

[33 : 27] Acting like we're entitled to honor. When all the time we're lying. And as Ananias and Sapphira learned, this duplicity costs.

It costs our community. It costs our culture. And ultimately, it costs ourselves. It costs us if this church in Acts was truly trying to be a jubilee community, if that is what the kingdom that Jesus was trying to build, if that is what the Holy Spirit was trying to stir, the preservation of power and systems of power over others is an anathema to that.

they can't exist in the same space and there be a healthy community. Community that is about loosing the chains of injustice, releasing captives from prison and providing for those in need, comforting those who mourn, restoring, restoring.

This requires interdependence. interdependence. It requires us to be vulnerable. It asks of us to trust the community with ourselves and what we have so that through this space, something wholer, something better, something more healthy can be born.

but if if we want the appearance of holiness but to not have to do the work to get there, we're never going to be able to build that kind of community.

[35 : 25] I think this story, there are some really big parts that I struggle with. It brings home some things to me.

I think I think that God is more interested in us being real than God is with us appearing holy. I think that God is wanting their church, their community of faith to be one of jubilee, one that confronts system of power, upends injustice, provides for others in physical and emotional and spiritual ways.

I think that God is inviting us to invest ourselves in such a community, to bring our real authentic selves and choosing to be interdependent in community with one another.

I recognize this isn't easy. But I think the possibilities are really exciting.

So I'm going to leave us today with this question. What do we owe one another in this space, in this community, and not as a statement of control or shame or guilt, but what do we ask ourselves?

[37 : 03] What is it that we can bring to this space to make this community one that does the jubilee work, that addresses oppression, that stands up against injustice, and that chooses to be vulnerable and real and not pretend to be holy or righteous or have it all together?

How do we come authentically into this community united by the Holy Spirit centered on Jesus? a lot to think about, and I hope as this week goes forward, this inspires you.

Have a great Memorial Day week. Get some rest. See y'all next week. Thank you for listening to the Table Church podcast.

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Thanks again for listening. Until next time.