

## Community Life II: Acts 4:32-5:16

Introduction:

The book of Acts strikes me as a lot like real life—two steps forward and one back—repeatedly. There is a pattern of growth and then some threat and the church's response, then further growth. Luke keeps it real. In today's passage, we start out with a description of the dream church, an idyllic fellowship marked by great preaching and great bonding with one another—and incredible generosity. Then in the next passage, a couple fudge on their gift to the church, are confronted in turn and each drops dead on the spot. Scary stuff for the church and everyone else. But it doesn't stop the growth of the church or powerful works being done through its leaders.

Probably some of us, writing the story might be tempted to leave out the Ananias and Sapphira part. There is so much good stuff happening—why not just leave this out? This just raises uncomfortable questions. Why did Luke include this, and what ought we take from that? Let's dig into the passage.

### 1. Authentic Community (4:32-37)

One heart and mind. The idea here is not of robotic, cult-like, cookie-cutter oneness, but of people who belong to each other, sharing common care and a common vision. It even went so far that they thought of their belongings as belonging to each other. This wasn't communism, but rather people thought of their possessions as available for others in the community who might need them. This even went so far as some who owned property selling it and bringing the proceeds to the apostles who were still handling distributions to those in need. The apostles' feet thing suggests that they entrusted their gifts to the leaders of this body, so not only was there generosity going on, but great trust.

No needy among them. Deuteronomy 15:4 says, "However, there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the Lord God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you." Moses says that an abundance mentality ought to characterize the Promised Land people. And so it is here in the new community of believers. There are no needy among them. What would it mean in the Smoky Row community if we simply were committed to ensuring that there were no needy among us?

Great power, great grace. The real question is what fuels this generosity? Immediately before this passage, Peter and John had been threatened by the authorities to stop preaching in Jesus name. They return to the church and the church has a big prayer meeting and at the end, it says, in v. 31, “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.” And then in verse 32 we read of how they are one in heart and mind. In verse 33 it says “with great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them.” I would propose that these people are not acting out of the mere goodness or convictions of their hearts, but out of the abundance of the Holy Spirit. This is the kind of community that happens when people open their hearts in desperate prayer for the Holy Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit comes, there is a compelling testimony to the risen Jesus, and generous care for each other. The Holy Spirit makes the good news of Christ live and overflow in both words and deeds.

Introducing Barnabas, an example of generosity. We’ve heard about people selling land. Now Luke uses this to introduce a character who will play an important role in the spread of the church, Joseph of Cyprus, or as he is known, from here on, Barnabas, a nickname which means “encourager.” His action here certainly was an encouragement. He was part of the Jewish diaspora, living in Cyprus, but back in Jerusalem, perhaps because of his role as a Levite, the tribe assigned to help with various temple functions. He follows a pattern already mentioned: selling – bringing money – and putting it at the apostles’ feet. The pattern is important for what happens next.

## 2. Authentic Community Threatened (Acts 5:1-11).

Ananias and Sapphira. Acts 5:1 introduces us to another couple involved in selling land to help the church. Even though this was voluntary, the selling of lands, which is known to Luke, and apparently the church, could create some unhealthy pressures and motives for giving. That seems to happen here. On the outside, what they do looks like what Barnabas and others have done: selling land – bringing money – putting it at the apostles’ feet. But there is a crucial difference. They have agreed to a lie—to represent their gift as the whole amount of the proceeds of the sale when they have kept back part. Can you see what’s wrong

with this? Into an atmosphere of authentic generosity and trust, they introduce false generosity and deception—and the practice of hypocrisy.

Peter and Ananias. What Ananias thought they had kept hidden, Peter exposes. We don't know if Peter caught wind of the actual sale price and saw the difference, or if this was Spirit of God given discernment. My hunch, because of what he says is that it is the latter. Peter asks a series of questions that reveal the seriousness of what Ananias has done. He asks how Satan could have so filled his heart that he would lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the sale amount. This reminds us of the truth that Satan is the father of lies. Lies are his calling card and chief strategy to undermine the work of God. He says that what Ananias did was lie to the Holy Spirit—the Spirit who filled and empowered and united the church. Then he says something very sad. Ananias didn't need to do it. The land was his. He didn't have to sell it. Or he could have sold it and just given part. Think about it—what would be wrong if someone here sold a summer cottage, or a parent's home that they'd inherited, and gave half to the church. Unless they misrepresented their gift—nothing would be wrong with it. Then Peter confirms how serious this was—Ananias didn't just lie to Peter, the apostles, and the church. In lying to the Spirit, he lied to God. Ananias drops dead and his body is removed.

Peter and Sapphira. Apparently, no word of what happened to Ananias gets back to Sapphira. But he has not returned, and Sapphira comes, probably looking for him. Peter's first question gives her a chance to come clean. He asks her about the price that was represented as the sale price. I think it is important that Peter gives her a chance to act for herself. But she doesn't and supports the lie. What Peter says next adds to the seriousness of what the two have done. He says they have conspired to test the Spirit of the Lord. They acted intentionally together with the attitude that God wouldn't find out and wouldn't do anything. And Peter tells her that she will be carried out by the young men who have just buried her husband.

Death and fear. The result of each of these interviews was the person falling down, dying, being removed for burial, with great fear seizing all who heard, inside and outside the church. This is the part of the story that is troubling for most of us. Death seems a severe punishment.

A couple things I would have us notice. The passage does not say that either Peter or God struck them down. They simply fell down and died. Peter's words to Sapphira most likely are simply his discernment that things would end for her as they did for her husband. But there is no evidence of a pronouncement of death as punishment for either. The language here is quite restrained. What happened? Was it two cases of cardiac arrest? We don't know.

There is one other clue in the passage about what may be going on. Peter says that they "kept back" part of the money. This is the same term used in the Greek version of Joshua 7 where Achan keeps part of the spoils that were to be devoted to destruction when Jericho fell. Israel lost their next battle because of it and only the deaths of Achan and his family set things right. Disobedience and deception at the beginning of Israel's life in the Promised Land was deadly and had to be confronted decisively. It had already cost lives.

Perhaps Luke wants us to see that this is what is going on here as well. Think about how bad lies and coverups are in some present-day situations in the church—particularly when innocent victims are neglected, and powerful perpetrators are protected—often for the outward reputation of the church. What might have happened to this early community if they got the idea that it was OK to lie to make themselves look better than they were? Holiness based on a lie was deadly to authentic community life. The Spirit wanted a holiness based on truth, even if that meant being less generous than others, because that was the measure of one's faith.

Certainly, the conclusion of the church is one of great fear. I can just imagine people saying—you don't lie around here—the Spirit of God knows and doesn't take kindly to it. Don't mess with the Holy Spirit!

This passage is tough, but it does tell us how much God hates lying, which is Satan's calling card, and hypocrisy. God wants an authentic church. In fact, this is the first time the term *ekklesia*, or "church" is used in Acts.

### 3. Authentic community extended (Acts 5:12-16)

An empowered community: Instead of this incident being a public relations disaster, Luke emphasizes five continuing ways God's Spirit is at work in a community that has been protected from deception and hypocrisy. The Spirit

moves the apostles to a new level of powerful work. We don't know the specifics, but signs and wonders reveal the power of the God who raised Jesus from the dead and point people to the truth of the gospel.

A teaching community: Solomon's Colonnade was where the apostles met daily with the new community to teach. Perhaps the incident with Ananias and Sapphira brought a greater urgency to know how the believers should conduct their lives in integrity before God.

A conversion community: While others did not join them, perhaps out of fear, people were drawn to the community and believed and became part of them. The combination of a powerful message and a compelling, authentic community is attractive, and people wanted in.

A healing community. A visible demonstration of the powerful new life of the risen Jesus was the healing of many and release from demons. Transformation in some form is always a mark of the presence of the Holy Spirit working among God's people.

A growing community. Crowds are now coming from around Jerusalem, particularly for healing. When the Spirit of God is at work in a church, its reach continues to expand.

Reflecting on Authentic Community: As I studied this passage, I was moved to reflect on the following

--A Holy Spirit community? The Holy Spirit is often the ignored member of the Trinity. I'm challenged to consider what it means for us to be a Holy Spirit community. Am I desperately concerned for the fullness and power and fruit of the Spirit working in my life, and in our corporate life? Conversely, were God to withhold his Spirit from Smoky Row—what would change? Am I doing all I can to maintain the unity of the Spirit by being one in heart and mind with the rest of you?

--A generous community? I think generosity has always marked Smoky Row, from the time we first came until now. What will it mean for me to live in God's great grace and abundance in terms of generosity? What would it mean if we had a stated goal that there would be no needy among the members of our congregation? What kind of vigilant care does that require of me?

--A WYSIWYG community? That stands for “what you see is what you get”. We live in a culture pervaded by lies and by self-promotion of an image through social media. God is not interested in our false images. In each of us, he sees the Christ-like princes and princesses we may become. But this doesn’t come by pretending to be better than we are, but by coming *as* we are in our brokenness, and through the Holy Spirit at work in our community being transformed. This challenges me to ask, are there people with whom I am honest about the broken places? It also challenges me to not pretend to be more generous, or better, or stronger, than I am.

--A resurrection power community? Do I really believe that through the Spirit, the risen Jesus is present in our midst? Do I live in the realization that for resurrection to happen in my life, first I need to die—die to doing things in my own strength, die to my reputation, to being comfortable in my forms of sickness. When we face challenges that are beyond our ability, do we believe in the power that raised Jesus?

This passage is an invitation into authentic, Spirit-empowered community. It challenges us to leave behind lying and pretending, to allow our hearts to be filled by the abundance of God’s Spirit and to be enriched in our lives by the resurrection story of Jesus and our mutual care for each other. How is Jesus inviting you to take another step into that community this week?