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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/20/2013, Midweek Lent 5
Acts 5:1-11, Ananias and Sapphira,

PRAYER OF THE DAY (Lent 5)

☐ Almighty God, our redeemer, in our weakness we have failed to be your messengers of forgiveness and hope in the world. Renew us by your Holy Spirit, that we may follow your commands and proclaim your reign of love; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

HOLY SCRIPTUREActs 5:1-11, RSV

¹But a man named Ananias with his wife Sapphira sold a piece of property, ²and with his wife's knowledge he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." ⁵When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. ⁶The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. ⁷After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." ⁹But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? Hark, the feet of those that have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." ¹⁰Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹And great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all who heard of these things.

HYMN LBW 410

We Give Thee but Thine Own

SERMON

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart?
You have not lied to men but to God.”⁵When Ananias
heard these words, he fell down and died. (Acts 5:4-5, RSV)

And so it was that Ananias and Sapphira died. Like Adam and Eve sinning together and being cast out of Eden, so Ananias and Sapphira sinned together and were cast of our this world.

Whenever I think of this story, I can hardly keep myself from smiling at the memory of the poor seminarian who had to preach on it. It might have been a good long while since you last heard this particular story. I doubt that you have ever heard it read during the Sunday morning liturgy, for it does not appear anywhere in our three-cycle of Sunday readings. But it does appear in what is called the “Daily Lectionary.” In our worship book—the *Lutheran Book of Worship*—the Daily Lectionary can be found beginning on page 179 in the front half of our hymnal. It is a useful tool for daily reading of the Bible. Over the course of two years, it would lead you through much of the Bible.

Well, back in seminary days at the Gettysburg Lutheran Theological Seminary, we worshiped daily in the chapel. Just about everyone in the community gathered for chapel, including the faculty. We worshiped around noon and then headed off for lunch at the Refectory.

On this particular day, it fell the lot of one of seminarians to preach on the appointed text, which was this evening’s story about Ananias and Sapphira. He read the story aloud, he reached the part about Sapphira falling dead at the feet of Saint Peter, just as her husband had earlier in the day, he dutifully ended with the words “The Word of the Lord,” and then he looked around uneasily, sighed, and said, “Well, here goes.” And he went ahead to preach on the text as best he could. That’s all any of us can do: preach as honestly and as well as we can on this text.

For the rest of us, it was an amusing, but also a perplexing moment. Here we were, young seminarians, thrilled to think that we were on our way to being part of the band of preachers who would be proclaiming the gospel. But what is “the gospel?” It is “good news,” isn’t it? It was the message that caused the Christmas angels to sing on the night of our Lord’s birth:

¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ¹⁴Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.
(Luke 2:13-14, RSV)

And did not Easter mean wonderful hope for humanity? Is it not the case that the resurrection of that good man Jesus must mean good news for the world?

But this story about Ananias and Sapphira certainly did not sound like good news! So what would the seminarian say? And now, what do I say all these years later?

Let's look first at the ones who fell, Ananias and Sapphira.

The context of the story is such that Saint Peter and the early church there in Jerusalem had reason to consider them to be "disciples." If they wanted to *seem* to be disciples, they had reason to think they could probably get away with it. They seem simply to be among those who were counted believers—a happy and holy band:

³²And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. ³³And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, ³⁵And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need. (Acts 4:32-35, KJV)

Other disciples have done what Ananias and Sapphira have done: they have sold their possessions and cast their lot in with the commonwealth of the church.

So here they come to Saint Peter. They are baptized, they are part of the community, prayers have been said for them that the Holy Spirit would come upon them. There is probably no way in the ordinary course of things to know that they are inwardly deceitful people.

But they are! Their sin seems to consist in this: They want to claim a spiritual dignity that they do not in fact live up to. It is a terrible case of try to pull the wool over the eyes of trusting people.

Perhaps we can try to defend them a bit. We could say, Well, they are trying to balance an *appearance* of holiness with the everyday reality of prudence. So they kept a little bit for a rainy day. No harm in that, is there?

Well, yes, there is harm in that, great harm, for they were not being truthful. Saint Peter was right: they were under no obligation to sell their property. And once they sold it, they were under no obligation to give the proceeds to the Church. But if they did sell and did give, then they should not have tried to deceive people about it.

And Peter is right in his fundamental charge against them: they thought they were tricking men like Peter. But in really they were trying to lie to God.

MORAL LESSONS

Here are some simple moral lessons we can learn from this story:

- ✦ Ahh, what misery love of money can lead us into. It would be better to go to bed at night poor, but with a good conscience, than to let love of money tempt us into a false manner of life.
- ✦ Sometimes circumstances forbid us to lay aside something for a rainy day. When we apply for low-income housing, we should not try to hide our assets. When we pay our taxes, we should be fair and square in doing so.
- ✦ The course of everyday lying and cheating and deceiving must stop!

WARNINGS FROM THE STORY

- ✦ Those who commit a crime, arrange their story in advance, go before the judge and tell their lies, will not get away with it. Ananias and Sapphira coordinated their story and stuck to it, but there is no deceiving God.
- ✦ One day, the cheater is going to get his comeuppance. “The gospel means that no one gets away with anything!” as my dear friend Pastor Jonathan Jenkins once said.

GOOD THAT CAME FROM THE STORY

- ✦ Ananias and Sapphira were prevented from falling on into deeper sin. This might seem like a lightweight thing, but I think we should trust that to the Holy Spirit. The Lord did not let them go on, and this decision was part of his care for our world.
- ✦ The story became renowned and probably saved others from sin.

AND WHAT OF ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA IN THE END?

This story is a measure of the seriousness of sin. There is a good reason that Jesus suffered and died for our sin. He fell, just as Ananias with his wife Sapphira fell. He fell, because that is how serious sin is. But he fell for the likes of them. And he is risen again. Ananias and Sapphira must deal with Jesus, and that could well be an uneasy kind of thing for them. But he died for the likes of Ananias and Sapphira and in the end, if there is hope for them it is simply that

they have fallen into the hands of the One who died for them, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.