



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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October 30, 2016

A sermon by
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"Why Should I (care)?"

Acts 5: 1-11: *But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; ²with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³'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? ⁴While 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!' ⁵Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. ⁶The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.*

⁷After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸Peter 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.' ⁹Then 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.' ¹⁰Immediately 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. ¹¹And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

The text that I just read is one of the most troubling stories in the New Testament. It is seldom preached. It doesn't show up in the lectionary and consequently even strict lectionary preachers avoid it. But we need to examine it and study it closely, because it is one of the first stories about the early Christian church. It is a story about the norms and values that held this fragile community together.

Upon first hearing, we might think it is an account of what happens to people who are cheap, or lack generosity, but this is not the case. Rather it is a story about the value the early church placed upon the ministry of caring and sharing. I have three points:

1. Why should I care?
2. Why should I share?
3. Do we dare?

Can we be caring, sharing and daring disciples?

I

Why should I care? The story of Ananias and Sapphira is not a story about the divine vengeance of God upon people who did not give generously. No, I believe this account was included in the Acts of the Apostles because it underscored the importance of caring and sharing to the early church. The living body of Christ was no longer the Jesus who walked the earth and called disciples. It was now the resurrection community of the faithful. They gathered together regularly to sing, to worship, but most importantly, to offer each other support. In the previous chapter, Acts 4, we read:

There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Their faith was not manifest in what they declared. It was not manifest in what they said. It was not manifest in a creed... all these things would come in the centuries to follow. Their faith was manifest in what they did and how they lived. They cared for each other. They shared with each other. "There was not a needy person among them."

Ananias and Sapphira were probably good people. They might have been articulate and strong believers. They might have showed up on the Lord's day and worshipped with the community. But they held back. They didn't care about the community enough to participate fully. Who knows why? We don't know their motivations. We only know ours.

The question for us is, "Why should I care?"

- a. You should care because Poland Presbyterian Church is a wonderful community. It is not perfect. It is made up of imperfect people, (and imperfect clergy!) who bring our quirks and our sins to this place... but we gather in God's name. PPC is a community that not only prays, but works to discover ways to show the love of Christ to other members in the community of faith. I am amazed at the care that happens here. On Thursday, I met with a group of members who, for the last 12 months, have taken the list of shut ins and homebound and have endeavored to visit them on behalf of the church. This is an example of members reaching out to those who might not feel a part of the physical community, but reminding them, with their presence, that they are. There is also a group who take communion to our shut ins on Sundays when we celebrate the Lord's Supper. When there is a death in the church family, volunteers come out of the woodwork to support the family with a luncheon at the funeral.
- b. You should care because Poland Presbyterian Church is a beacon that reflects the love of Christ in the world beyond these walls. Are you aware of the outreach in the Mahoning Valley that this congregation does?
 - Salvation Army, (over 50 ringers!)
 - Beatitude House,
 - Habitat for Humanity,
 - Hospice of the Valley,
 - Meals on Wheels,
 - Mission of Love,
 - The Needle's Eye/Southside Ministries,
 - Ohio Valley Teen Challenge,
 - Operation Learning Community Program,
 - Poland Dry Pantry,
 - Poland Interfaith Pantry,
 - Protestant Family Service,
 - Rescue Mission of Mahoning Valley,
 - Ursuline Sisters HIV/AIDS Ministry,

Plus, we have our own Helping Hands Hotline.

These are the projects in this area! Your financial support also reaches into the world, helping Syrian refugees in Lebanon, feeding hungry people in Central America, bringing clean water to villages in Africa, building homes in South America, (Dave Lang), and supporting Sonu in India.

When I was a child, playing by the lake, I enjoyed throwing stones into the lake and watching the ripples spread from splash of the stone. The stones were not large, but the ripples would spread for hundreds of feet, reaching well beyond where I could throw. All those agencies and efforts I just mentioned are, in some way, but a pebble in the great sea of need... but you need to know that what Poland Presbyterian Church sends its ripples into the world, making a difference and sharing the light of Christ with others.

Why should I care????

- Because in this world, we need communities of faith that will model what Christ taught about goodness, grace, and love.
- We need communities of faith that will defiantly make a stand against the selfishness, the brutality, the bullying, the exploitation, and the malaise that characterizes our post modern age.
- We need a community that will take the time to teach our young, not merely the knowledge of things seen, but of those things unseen; teach them about the love of Christ, the power of the spirit, but also about the reality of evil and their own capacity to do good, but also wrong.

Why should I care about PPC? Each of you can add a thousand additional reasons!

II

Why should I share? Ananias and Sapphira did not share. They could not answer that question. They held back. We lose something... something very real, very human when we hold back from sharing. Why should we share? Three reasons.

1. We should share because we need to. I loved the moment for mission that Dave Reed gave. He told us that he needs to give, more than God needs his gift. He needs Christ. Each of us desires the experience of being part of something greater than us. The heart desires some transcending purpose that makes sense of all the loose ends of life. Sharing is the key to discovering this greater sense of self and purpose. It is in sharing that we discover and receive life.
2. We should share because it brings joy. I can say this for certain: One of the greatest joys I know in life is sharing and giving. Nothing makes my heart feel better than when I can give something of myself, whether it is my time, my finances, or some object that I have. I remember listening to the annual stewardship sermon at Second Reformed Church in New Brunswick, NJ when I was a child. We were implored to give “until it hurts.” That is not the message of Jesus.... He calls us to share, not until it hurts, but until it feels good. Like the marathon runner, who discovers the “runner’s high” the exhilaration of investing all your physical energy in a race, those who share, beyond the point of pain, discover a powerful sense of joy and exhilaration. We were created by God to share.
3. We should share, because it is contagious. Poland Presbyterian Church has experienced this contagion. In mid-August, the tomato plants that were planted outside of my office began to produce more than I could ever eat. I put some on a table so that people could pick some up after worship. Soon my tomatoes were joined by vegetables that others grew and shared. Then some flowers appeared. This just happened! Now our deacons are looking at making it part of their programming. Sharing is contagious!

III

Do we dare? I want to conclude with a challenge. I want to dare Poland Presbyterian Church to be better stewards, more generous in your sharing, more loving in your caring. I want to challenge you: Dare to care! Dare to share!

In four weeks, there will be another face in this pulpit. Paul Anderson and his family will make some tremendous sacrifices to respond to God's call to be your pastor. I have responded to five different calls in my ministry, and I will say that each one required daring on my part, and sacrifice on the part of my family. We have left homes we loved, neighbors we cared about, good schools, and for Karen, good jobs. We had to be separated for nearly 6 months so that a house could sell, because we could not handle two mortgages.

That is the nature of ministry. Paul will be leaving a home of 17 years with his family. I know they are looking forward to life among you and all the wonderful things about Poland and this community.... But you also need to remember the daring nature of their decision. They are leaving the security of what they know, to be among you. They will be living apart, selling a house, picking up stakes in order to join you as your pastor.

I have grown to love you as a congregation, and it is out of that love that I challenge you to be daring in your caring and your sharing. As a congregation, try to match the daring and courage of Paul Anderson, your new pastor, who will move across the country to serve you... match his daring, his caring, with your sharing. I ask you to think about this as you consider your pledged commitment to the church. You have reasons to care; reasons to share, do you have the courage to dare?