



Poland Presbyterian Church

*At the Green since 1802*

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A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

*“An Awful Act of Avarice”*

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

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

The Mission Study Committee recently studied the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts, describing how the early Christians held things in common and shared everything. One person raised the question, “I wonder if anyone took advantage of this?” The answer to her question is “yes.” Ananias and Sapphira tried to scam the community: *an awful act of avarice*. It is one of the truly troubling stories in the bible because there is no forgiveness, no grace, no opportunity for repenting. They were struck dead. We read that “great fear seized the whole church.” We also know that the God of Jesus is not a vengeful God... but by the same token we need to deal with the hard texts of the Bible, and this is certainly a difficult text about giving to the church and the consequences of not giving.

This morning I have two points: 1. Why you shouldn’t give to the church. 2. Why you should give to the church.

I

**Why you shouldn’t give to the church:** We should not give to the church out of fear. The story that I read from the Acts of the Apostles provokes fear. Is it stating that we should give to the church, lest we be struck dead? If so, it is declaring a vengeful, punishing God who inflicts harm on those who do not obey. I don’t believe that is true, and I also don’t think that is the intended message of this particular story in Acts. Such an interpretation runs counter to all that we know about God. It contradicts the teachings of Jesus, “do not be afraid.” There is no message of grace or forgiveness in this interpretation, and certainly one does not get a sense of hope when one reads the story this way. We should not give to the church out of fear.

We also should not give to the church out of guilt. There are some charities that play upon the guilt they engender with images, facts and figures. “If you don’t make a contribution ... this will happen.” It is a play on guilt. I fear

that there are some clergy and church leaders who inspire such guilt. Guilt has its place in our lives, especially when it convicts us of our bad behavior, but it is not the foundation of genuine devotion and generosity. It also contradicts the message of the gospel. Christ came to free us from our sin and from our guilt. Does this let us off the hook? No. We should give to the church, but for the right reasons.

## II

**Why should we give to the church?** Let's return to the story in Acts. As troubling as it is, it has an important message. It is part of a larger story that describes the first community of faith, or the church. It was a community where people belonged. Their sense of belonging was cemented through sharing.

Why should we give to the church? Because we belong here. This is our home; our community. The irony of this is that it does not become our home, our family, our community, until we give. We give because we want to fully participate in the community. We are part of something much bigger than ourselves and our possessions.

Annianias and Sapphira's demise was not directly linked to any action of God or of the church. It was their own undoing. The writer of Acts was concerned that the two of them held back. They were not honest about what they had and what they gave. They may have given more than anyone else, but their gift lacked the integrity of full participation.

Why should we give? Because we are part of a larger community: the Church of Jesus Christ, and we want to participate fully in it.

But there are other reasons, and I will speak personally. I give, because I need to give. It is a spiritual need that I have, and when I do not share the abundance that God has given to me, my spirit begins to sour. I need to give regularly and proportionately because it has given me a degree of discipline in my financial life. It has also given me an attitude about money and financial matters that is resilient. Giving is a matter of faith, knowing that God will take care of me.... There are question marks in all of our, but I also know God will provide for the needs in my life.

I need to give because giving brings me joy. When Karen and I first got married, we made a commitment to giving proportionately from our income. It was not easy those first years. When we were raising our child, there were a few weeks when one of the cars sat idle in the driveway until we had the funds to repair it... but we gave.. and we would often say, we can't wait until we are able to give more... We can now, and there are few things that give us more pleasure than sharing. I give because I enjoy it.

Finally, I need to give generously, because I can... and not everybody can. My gift is important, because if I hold back, like Anianias and Sapphira, the community of faith will suffer, and I will be less than a full participant. I give and will try to give more because I can, and others may not be able.

Why should we give to the church? Don't give because you are afraid, or feel guilty. The story of Anianias and Sophira is an awful tale of avarice. God will not strike you dead... but by the same token, you will miss out on a great deal. You will miss the feeling of joy and satisfaction that comes from being part of something larger than yourself.. You will miss the meaning, purpose, and hope that comes from sharing. You will miss the experience of fully belonging... belonging to one another.... Belonging to God.

As you contemplate your gift to the church:

- Give because you are part of this community.
- Give because you love this place.
- Give because this place loves you.
- Give because you were nurtured here.
- Give because this congregation is called to nurture the children of this community and future generations.
- Give because you need to give.
- Give because you can.
- Give.. not until hurts...Give beyond that point.
- Give until it feels good..

Give until you experience the joy of sharing. This is the good news. Amen.