

Acts 4 & 5

32 The community of believers was one in heart and mind. None of them would say, "This is mine!" about any of their possessions, but held everything in common. 33 The apostles continued to bear powerful witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and an abundance of grace was at work among them all. 34 There were no needy persons among them. Those who owned properties or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds from the sales, 35 and place them in the care and under the authority of the apostles. Then it was distributed to anyone who was in need.

36 Joseph, whom the apostles nicknamed Barnabas (that is, "one who encourages"), was a Levite from Cyprus. 37 He owned a field, sold it, brought the money, and placed it in the care and under the authority of the apostles.

However, a man named Ananias, along with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property. 2 With his wife's knowledge, he withheld some of the proceeds from the sale. He brought the rest and placed it in the care and under the authority of the apostles. 3 Peter asked, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has influenced you to lie to the Holy Spirit by withholding some of the proceeds from the sale of your land? 4 Wasn't that property yours to keep? After you sold it, wasn't the money yours to do with whatever you wanted? What made you think of such a thing? You haven't lied to other people but to God!" 5 When Ananias heard these words, he dropped dead. Everyone who heard this conversation was terrified. 6 Some young men stood up, wrapped up his body, carried him out, and buried him.

7 About three hours later, his wife entered, but she didn't know what had happened to her husband. 8 Peter asked her, "Tell me, did you and your husband receive this price for the field?"

She responded, "Yes, that's the amount."

9 He replied, "How could you scheme with each other to challenge the Lord's Spirit? Look! The feet of those who buried your husband are at the door. They will carry you out too." 10 At that very moment, she dropped dead at his feet. When the young men entered and found her dead, they carried her out and buried her with her husband. 11 Trepidation and dread seized the whole church and all who heard what had happened.

Psalms 145

8 "The Lord is merciful and compassionate,
very patient, and full of faithful love.

9 The Lord is good to everyone and everything;
God's compassion extends, to all his handiwork!"

14 The Lord supports all who fall down,
straightens up all who are bent low.

15 All eyes look to you, hoping,
and you give them their food right on time,

16 opening your hand
and satisfying the desire of every living thing.
17 The Lord is righteous in all his ways,
faithful in all his deeds.
18 The Lord is close to everyone who calls out to him,
to all who call out to him sincerely.
19 God shows favor to those who honor him,
listening to their cries for help and saving them.
20 The Lord protects all who love him,
but he destroys every wicked person.
21 My mouth will proclaim the Lord's praise,
and every living thing will bless God's holy name
forever and always.

Matthew 14

13 When Jesus heard about John, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. When the crowds learned this, they followed him on foot from the cities. 14 When Jesus arrived and saw a large crowd, he had compassion for them and healed those who were sick. 15 That evening his disciples came and said to him, "This is an isolated place and it's getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves."

16 But Jesus said to them, "There's no need to send them away. You give them something to eat."

17 They replied, "We have nothing here except five loaves of bread and two fish."

18 He said, "Bring them here to me." 19 He ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. He took the five loaves of bread and the two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them and broke the loaves apart and gave them to his disciples. Then the disciples gave them to the crowds. 20 Everyone ate until they were full, and they filled twelve baskets with the leftovers. 21 About five thousand men plus women and children had eaten.

Sermon

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be pleasing to you O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer:
Amen.

So when's the last time you dropped dead because you didn't give the full portion of your 10% tithe to the church? Seems like we're all upright, and since the average giving of church members in the U.S. is something like 2¼ % of their total income, apparently smiting isn't God's standard procedure with those who give less than expected to the church's work. And in the story from Acts today, Ananias and Saphira weren't just expected to give 10%. They were expected to give everything they received into the care of the church. Every ounce of income flowed through the church. By my calculations, that's a lot, no matter how much you make.

But rest assured, they didn't die because they failed to give as much as they could. They died because they lied to the church and tried to hide the fullness of their abilities from God. They didn't perish because they failed. They perished because they didn't try to be Christ's Body and because they lied about their efforts. Ultimately, their doom was that they didn't try.

Today we embark upon a this four week series on Acts, looking into the very nature of the church. During Lent, we talked about the missional posture of the church, our call to live as Jesus's witnesses, to share our stories of God's work with others and invite people to become a part of that story. The Book of Acts is all about the life and growth of the early church, and since we've already talked extensively this year about our call to share God's story, we're going to identify key practices of God's church.

It's important to distinguish between church practices and church identity. Church identity is our God-given nature as the

Body of Christ, as baptized children of God, as sinners made saints. We don't make that happen. God makes that happen in us. Our identity is what exists even when we fail to practice what we preach. Church practices, the functions that we serve as the church, are the behaviors we perform, or indeed should perform, after God makes those things happen in us. Church practices follow God's initiative. In other words, we don't make ourselves the church. God does that. However, at its best, the church exemplifies its God-given identity through certain practices. When we talk about our normative practices, we talk about what we should be like.

So you might be wondering, somewhat nervously, what practice do we learn from this story in Acts? Ananias and Saphira certainly aren't positive examples. Perhaps we should look to the ideal set forth earlier in the reading: *There were no needy persons among them. Those who owned properties or houses would sell*

them, bring the proceeds from the sales, and place them in the care and under the authority of the apostles. Then it was distributed to anyone who was in need. This all sounds great, but unfortunately, most churches don't enact that kind of selflessness. And I mean that literally. It is unfortunate that we as a church have forsaken the example set forth before us by the earliest Christians. That total commitment to life together, through joy and sorrow, trial and triumph, harmony and discord, is a beautiful way to bind our faithfulness with the community of faith. That was indeed part of Ananias and Saphira's doom.

But what separated them from the church wasn't their failure, for indeed, we all fail. It was their lack of effort. It was the absence of aspiration. A key mark of the church is aspiring to be the church. That's our focus for this week: the church aspires to be the church, not denying our God-given responsibility to give to those who ask even when we fail, not denying God's call to love

justice and do mercy and walk humbly with God, even when we benefit from privilege and prejudice and the cold, mechanistic calculations of personal profit. Instead, we aspire to be who God's called us to be, even when it seems improbable.

There's a full deck of cliches that help to illustrate this point. If at first you don't succeed, try and try again. Practice makes perfect. There's even some more faith-based options, like "God loves a trier," though for some reason, that one gives me the literary heeby jeebies. Like most cliches, these fall short of truly describing Christian aspiration. Life as the church isn't about success. It's about faith and faithfulness in community. Perfection isn't the church's job, but instead God's responsibility. And God loves us all, not just those who try. But still, the point is taken. Effort, attempt, aspiration helps to shape our life as God's people, because God is an aspirational God. Jesus isn't satisfied with mediocre life. Jesus comes to give us abundant life.

So rather than a cliché, let me brag on my niece a bit, because when we were together this week, three year old Charlie showed us what it means to try. Our extended family shares some property on a small lake in central Ohio where we spent a few days with my brother, sister, and all their children. One of the rites of passage growing up at the lake is climbing up a huge rock at the corner of our cove and jumping off into the water below.

Charlie's the youngest, only three, and when four boys between 5 and 11 swam over to the rock, so too this three year old little girl wanted to climb up and jump off. I was on top of the rock, ready to receive Charlie, and she climbed well toward me. As she reached out her hand, though, her feet slipped, she fell back toward the water, and she began to cry. I grabbed her hand, hauled her up the rock, and held her in the midst of her tears. Were we disappointed because she fell? Not at all. I was thrilled at her effort, and even more excited that the fear and pain associated

with the fall didn't stop her from swimming with the boys, tubing behind the boat, and otherwise joining in the life of the community. Charlie couldn't quite do everything yet, but that didn't stop her from trying.

That's the aspirational heart of this story: we find the gift of Christ's abundant life as we try to live that life. That's what the early church discovered, that in trying to be the church, we learn to be the church. Conversely, Ananias and Saphira discovered the lifeless experiences born out of ignoring the kind of people we're made to be. The Gospel shaped the generosity of the early church, so for Ananias and Saphira to ignore the common good and then lie about their shortcomings betrayed a simple truth: they weren't trying to be the church, and they didn't care enough about that identity to admit their mistakes. But as we try, God comes alongside us, having already given us a wonderful gift of life, and shows us how together we might live life to the full.

That's what Jesus confronts in the disciples as they see the hunger rise among the thousands of people who've been seeking Jesus's life-giving word. "There's no need to send them away. You give them something to eat." They bring forth a meager effort of a little bread and even less fish, and yet, as they aspire to be the church, as they attempt to become Christ's hands alive and at work in the world, a miraculous thing happens: if only for a moment, they truly **are** the church, truly faithful, truly meeting needs and giving all that they have so that other people might meet Jesus. The impressive part of the story for our faith is the miracle of Jesus. The important part of the story for our life is the attempt of the disciples in obedience to Christ's word of possibility.

South Wedge Mission, one of our ELCA mission congregations that impresses me deeply, has a motto that helps us to live this impulse while not falling into works righteousness.

“Not better than others. Better for others.” As a church, we’re to aspire to be better, and that’s a good thing. We're made by God to be better. But that betterment isn't self serving. Our aspiration to be the church is to be better at living Christ's life today. About sharing his healing, feeding, forgiving, reconciling presence with the world and not holding anything back. Withholding anything, not just money, but time, commitment, desire, from God’s mission is a response based in fear and mistrust. Giving to God’s mission is built on the framework of hope, that our great Creator is building a world where we don't need to store in barns, and so our resources, all of them, are better used by sharing with others.

Like Ananias and Saphira, we will fail. But may we together always aspire to be better for others, because God in Christ gave everything, even life itself, to be better for us. Amen.