

## Acts ~ Reimagining

### Acts 4:32-5:42

In last week's reading we saw the initial wave of external opposition to the Gospel and the early Church. In this week's reading we're going to see something even more insidious...internal corruption, and how swiftly, even shockingly, it was dealt with. But first, we get to see a snapshot of the life of the early Church, from which every iteration of the Church across time and place can learn something.

4:32-35 is a beautiful picture of love and unity, an accurate portrait of the Gospel embodied by a community/family of faith. Yet when we read the words, "*All the believers were one in heart and mind...*" are we to understand that they all shared the same opinion on everything? Highly doubtful. They were one/unified on who their Lord and Savior was and submitted to Him and each other accordingly. They were living out the Love and Lordship of Jesus, and what we read is what that looked like.

"*No one claimed private ownership of any possessions...*" (4:32) is how they understood Jesus when He said, "*none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.*" (Luke 14:33) They understood that possessions were entrusted to their care, but were not actually theirs. This is the heartbeat of stewardship. It is easy to give up something when we don't actually consider it "mine".

Why was the early Church growing by leaps and bounds? It is safe to say that when people saw this sort of lavish sharing, this sort of care for one another, they wanted to be part of this group, this new movement. From a very early stage, really from the get-go, we see that the early Church developed a "social security" program of sorts. The modern church can learn a lot from this. Instead of looking out for one another and bearing one another's burdens, we look to the government to provide for us. This is why it is so easy for governments to become god-like...because people look to them for provision and security...which is something we are to look to God for. And God has provided a system...it's called the Church. Sadly the Church, at least in the West, has devolved into something less than what we were designed to be; we have become domesticated.

Imagine (remember our theme of Reimagine) if we, the Church today, actually considered the things, talents, resources that are in our care as truly being God's; and if we were willing to share (and trust) one another on this level. We could actually become the alternative society the Church was always meant to be. Again, what we are reading is simply what happens when people take the Love and Lordship of Jesus seriously...when they truly live out the implications of the Gospel.

Let's take note of the two times the apostles are mentioned in this passage:

- "*With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus...*" (4:33)

- “...[they] brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as it was needed.” (4:35)

The first task, their primary task, was testifying to the resurrection of Jesus. The second task, and secondary task, was administering the resources of the community. What we will see within just a couple of chapters (actually, next week in our schedule) is that the apostles’ role in this second task was not sustainable. The very important task of the Church taking care of the Church, of love being lived out in practical ways, as important as it was/is, is also very involved and taxing and will become a distraction from the apostles’ primary task. Now let me be clear, these two tasks MUST go together...but practically/logistically speaking, in order for that to go well, more people will need to be involved. We’ll see this play out shortly. But first, we need to deal with something quite extreme.

What are we to make of the whole Ananias and Sapphira situation? It should probably not be surprising that money was involved in the first case of internal corruption within the Church. Let’s state the obvious: this is a troubling passage. It probably leads to more questions than answers. We’ll touch upon some of those questions, but just know that this incident has puzzled Christians, even Bible scholars, for years and leaves us scratching our heads.

So, first of all, did this incident actually happen or is this some early Christian myth or lore? Every indication is that Ananias and Sapphira were literal people and that they literally died, in a rather extraordinary manner.

Wasn’t the punishment rather extreme considering the crime? To our sensibilities it certainly seems so. Now let me quickly say that I, in no way, feel the need to justify or defend God’s actions. When I read something in Scripture that doesn’t fit what I expect of God (as is the case in this passage) I believe the best/right approach is to assume there’s more going on than I understand and that God always does what is good and right. Or, to say it another way, what is lacking is my/our understanding not God’s justice in the situation.

Also, to clarify, the issue/problem wasn’t that Ananias and Sapphira didn’t give all the proceeds of the sale of their land. Nothing required them to give away all the proceeds. As Peter pointed out, the issue was that they lied about how much they gave. Had they simply said something like, “We sold some land and want to give X% to the Church”, then no harm, no foul. But they made it seem as if they gave ALL the proceeds; they made it seem as if they were making a larger gift/sacrifice than they actually were. The motive, one would presume, is one of image-management...to appear to be more generous givers than they actually were. Their heart, it seems, was about looking good in the eyes of others as opposed to love of God and neighbor.

Another important observation that we definitely don’t want to miss: Who did Ananias and Sapphira lie to? They lied to Peter and the rest of the Church. But Peter was quick to point out that they, in fact, lied to the Holy Spirit. Well, which was it? The answer is both. And this is something we’re going to see consistently throughout Acts. Jesus/the Holy Spirit so closely identify/associate with His people/the Church, that to lie to one is to lie to the other. (Another

example of this is in chapter 9 when Jesus asks Saul, “*Why are you persecuting Me?*” But who was Saul persecuting? The church. But in so doing, Jesus took it personally that Saul was persecuting Him.) Interesting, isn’t it? This should give us tremendous comfort and confidence that Jesus allies Himself so closely to us, His people.

Yet another insight into the Ananias and Sapphira episode: How did Peter deal with them? He spoke truth to them...and left all other consequences to God. (And in this particular case, the consequences were deathly serious...pun intended.) The point being, Peter (as representing the leaders of the early church) didn’t take matters into his own hands. Sadly, Christian leaders throughout history have often not avoided the temptation of taking matters into their own hands.

Some perspective from commentator Willie James Jennings, “*Luke has entered the frightening space where the name of God is mentioned in relation to violence and death. He may have been alluding back to the tragic story of Achan in Joshua 7:1-26, where similar events join these stories...Unlike Achan, who is killed at the hands of God’s people, the apostles’ hands are not free to kill. There is no justification for killing in the name of Jesus. Indeed they speak no curse. They conjure no evil force. They give themselves no right to take life. Such will never be given to the followers of Jesus. But there is violence...Readers of this revolution must never run from the violence in it. God takes from Ananias and Sapphira what only God gives; life...Only the Holy Spirit may draw back the breath of life. A line has been drawn that the followers of Jesus may not cross. We are the people of resurrection, not death.*”

Additionally, as New Testament scholar N.T. Wright points out, “*...the early Christian community, without even trying, was functioning somewhat like the temple itself. It was a place of holiness, a holiness so dramatic and acute that every blemish was magnified...To name the name of Jesus, and to invoke the Holy Spirit, is to claim to be the temple of the living God, and that is bound to have consequences.*” God’s holiness is a dangerous thing and not to be trifled with. Numerous Old Testament stories attest to this fact. (See Leviticus 10:1-3; II Samuel 6:6-9; II Chronicles 26:16-21; Isaiah 6:1-7)

Twice, in verse 5 and verse 11, Luke makes nearly identical comments that “*great fear seized all who heard about these events.*” Well, yes, I imagine so; that’s completely understandable. But I think it’s important to note that there is a difference between Luke describing the emotional state of the people after this event (as he does) versus implying that this is a state of being in which God’s people are to live. Luke is not saying the latter...he was simply stating the former. Our good God doesn’t want us living in fear that in any moment He might smite us. (At the same time, He doesn’t want us taking sin—particularly our own—lightly.)

On a lighter note, I like to think that we see in this story the very first youth ministry activity. Did you notice that it was the “young men” who buried Ananias and Sapphira? It is interesting to consider that, in today’s world, youth ministry often tries hard to attract and entertain young people, while in the very first glimpse we see of youth in the early church they are burying the dead. Just something to think about...

Again, not to defend or justify God (He certainly doesn't need me to do that) but as I was reflecting upon this passage, it occurred to me that maybe the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira weren't as bad as we tend to think. Yes, God's judgment on them was sudden, swift, and severe. But let me ask you...how do you want to die? You and I, all of us, are going to die sometime, somehow, some way. I have seen people suffer with long, painful, deteriorating diseases. My own dad had a decade-long battle with cancer. It was gruesome and cruel. To die instantaneously doesn't sound that bad, all things considered. Perhaps even in His punishment, God was merciful. Just something to think about...

The next section (5:12-16) is both encouraging and a tad confusing. Encouraging in that it's always exciting to hear of miraculous signs and wonders, of people being healed, especially in extraordinary ways like Peter's shadow falling on them. And yet a bit confusing when we read two sentences back-to-back that seem to contradict each other. "*No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.*" (5:13-14) So which was it? Did people stay away from them or did people join them? Well, both. Notice that the believers were meeting in Solomon's Colonnade. That is a location on the eastern side of the temple court. Remember the religious leaders had threatened them to not teach of Jesus (4:18-21), yet here they were gathering (and presumably teaching) in the temple area...right under the nose of the religious leaders. That's what you call an "In your face!" type of situation. It has been said that there are two types of people in the world...those who are like moths and those who are like cockroaches. When the light is turned on, moths go towards the light while cockroaches scatter to the darkness. That's probably a good illustration of what was happening here. Some people likely kept their distance because they didn't want to be at odds with the religious leaders or perhaps had heard about people dropping dead. Others were intrigued, both at the declaration of the Gospel and the teaching about Jesus, as well as the miracles and healings.

Well it wasn't going to take long before the religious leaders tried to put the kibosh on all this. It should be noted that their motivation was jealousy (5:17). They weren't motivated by a different vision of what was best for the people; they weren't concerned that the apostles were teaching heresy and leading the people astray. Nope, it was just old-fashioned jealousy. So they used the power at their disposal and arrested the apostles and put them in jail.

Isn't it interesting how sometimes we really like it when God intervenes...like He does here by sending an angel to release them from jail; and sometimes we don't like it when God intervenes...like with Ananias and Sapphira. As tough of a pill as it is to swallow, we do need to remember that God does not need to explain Himself to us. (But I would be quick to add, I do believe God likes it when we go to Him with our questions and confusions...He welcomes our curiosity and interest, even though He may not be as forthcoming with answers as we'd like. I think His implied question back to us is always, "Do you trust Me?")

Now it seems that even God is getting into the "In your face!" business as His instructions to the apostles through the angel indicate, "*Go, stand in the temple courts and tell the people the full*

*message of this new life.*" (5:20) In other words, "Go back into the heart of the opposition and keep telling them what I'm up to."

A night, or partial night, in jail didn't seem to detour the apostles, as they confidently went back to the temple and taught the people. Again the contrast: the religious leaders motivated by jealousy (which really is a form of fear); the apostles motivated by obedience, love, and joy, producing immense courage in them. This is a good picture of the fruit of the Spirit.

It is hard not to smile, perhaps chuckle a bit, at the scene of the Sanhedrin sending for the apostles in jail only to find the jail empty. (5:21b-24) When they heard that the apostles were once again teaching in the temple courts, we see the religious leaders, once again, motivated by fear, this time of the people. (5:26) Can you imagine the conversation as the captain of the guard and his officers approach the apostles, "Umm, may we possibly have a word with y'all?," hat in hand, so to say. The apostles graciously acquiesced.

It's ironic, isn't it, that the Sanhedrin were concerned about being seen as guilty of Jesus' blood (5:28) when they were, precisely in fact, guilty of His blood. It was not that long before when they so boldly and confidently stated to Pilate, "Let His blood be on us and on our children." (Matthew 27:25) Be careful what you ask for.

Peter, once again, sticks it to them, perhaps a bit more forcefully this time, "We must obey God rather than men!" (5:29) Peter did not let them off the hook that they were responsible for Jesus' death. Well that fired up the Sanhedrin, who were now ready to kill the apostles (5:33)

It should be noted that, in the Gospels, we see the Pharisees as Jesus' primary opposition. As we move into Acts, the Sadducees and chief priests (the bulk of the Sanhedrin) take the forefront of opposition, while the Pharisees become a bit more moderate, as a prominent Pharisee named Gamaliel exhibits. (5:34) (Take note of the name...it will come up again later in the book.) Gamaliel was able to talk some sense into the Sanhedrin by offering a brief history lesson. We have preserved for us, historically, very scant and speculative information regarding the Theudas and Judas the Galilean that Gamaliel mentioned, but apparently the reminder of their stories was enough to calm down the Sanhedrin.

It was not persuasive enough to keep the apostles from getting flogged, however. To be flogged means to be beaten with rods or whips or switches or even a cat o'nine tails. Recall that Jesus was flogged as part of the torture prior to crucifixion. This was no slap on the wrist. This was painful, cruel, humiliating, physical abuse. The Sanhedrin hoped that this beating would put a little teeth to their order of no longer speaking in the name of Jesus. (Spoiler alert: it didn't work.)

Verse 41 ought to stop any modern day Christian, particularly in our context, in our tracks. "The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name." Imagine if the Church today was made up of people with this sort of dedication and conviction. Think of the petty things we get whiny about. The apostles were flogged, yet rejoiced. We don't like to be inconvenienced in the slightest. In fact, if we don't like

something we just leave and join another congregation or just give up on church altogether. Our forebears happily accepted being beaten for Christ's sake. This story invites us to check our commitment level.

This passage also provides a reality check for us. Being faithful witnesses and disciples of Jesus isn't "safe". As Willie James Jennings states, speaking on this very passage, "*They are free, but they are not safe. They are never safe. Safety is not the inheritance of Jesus' disciples, only witness.*"

Two final points come from the last verse of this chapter, "*Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.*" (5:42)

First, notice the rhythm of the early Church...day to day (not week to week) they met together; and they did so both in large contexts (in the temple courts) and in smaller contexts (house to house). Their frequency is tied, again, to their commitment level. This new Jesus movement was not some optional religious extracurricular activity or hobby. This was a new kind of life. This wasn't something they just sort of fit into their existing life. Their lives were completely overhauled. Has that been your experience in following Jesus?

Logistically and practically, they utilized the resources that were at their disposal...namely their homes and public spaces. Their faith, their lives, this community of Jesus followers was on display for all to see...it was out there for the public to see, watch, and observe. Following Jesus cannot be reduced to a liturgy that is followed an hour a week...it is a completely new way of understanding and living life.

Second, as has been noted in earlier weeks, the storyline of Acts is one of the Gospel continuing to expand and advance, overcoming all barriers, obstacles, and opposition. We see that again here: the apostles were beaten and ordered to stop teaching about Jesus, but Luke tells us they did the exact opposite..."*they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.*" They were not daunted nor dismayed or discouraged. They had that much confidence and commitment, love and loyalty to King Jesus. The self-examination questions for us are obvious.

### Possible Discussion Questions

- How does 4:32-35 ignite your imagination for what might be possible for CUMC?
- When a group of people are of "*one heart and mind*" what do you think that practically looks like? Have you ever experienced such a dynamic? (If so, please share...)
- "*No one claimed any of their possessions as their own...*" (4:32) What do you claim as your own? (And on what basis do you do so?)

- As you consider your own needs, how do you typically think of those needs being met? (Through your own effort/labor? Through family/friends? Through the government?) If you were in a bind, where would you turn to for help?
- What feelings do you experience and what questions do you have as you consider Ananias and Sapphira?
- God's judgment upon Ananias and Sapphira was swift and severe...observation tells us that this is the exception to the rule. Now let's get really honest with each other, would you rather it be the rule than the exception? Are there some whom you wish God would judge similarly? Explain.
- Can you share a time when you defied the powers-that-be out of a sense of what was right, good, just, and true? Have you ever participated in civil disobedience? (Or disobeyed religious authorities in order to obey God?)
- What do you think about the apostles' reaction (rejoicing) after being persecuted/beaten? What does that make you think and feel as you consider your own commitment to Jesus and His Kingdom?
- Now that we are five chapters into Acts, is there anything you've seen/observed through Acts that you would like to see form/inform CUMC? What has sparked your imagination thus far?
- In what ways do you see the church today (in our context; in your experience) playing it "safe"? What do you think the church/Christians should be willing to risk for their faith?
- In our day and age a popular thought is "*Avoid extremes...Everything in moderation...*", which works fine, and is even wise, in some ways/categories, for example with food and drink. But when we read about the early Church, at least by our standards, they seem extreme/radical in their commitment to Jesus and each other. But words like "extreme" and "moderation" tend to carry a value judgment. Perhaps a better word might be "consistent". If we do a compare/contrast of the early Church to Church-as-we-know it, it's easy to observe some distinct differences. Which way of being the Church do you think is most consistent with the Gospel message? (Please explain your answer.)

(Or to ask that question in a less wordy way...)

- What aspects of the early Church are really attractive to you, really draw you in, make you think, "I wish we were more like that."? What aspects make you think/feel, "Whoa, I don't know about that. That seems a bit overboard or extreme."?
- One of the ways, I believe, our imaginations have been stifled (and why "reimagining" is so important) is in thinking that Church-as-large-group-gathered is somehow more

important, more impactful than Church-as-small-group-gathered. Perhaps this is due to the typical American idea that “Bigger is better...”. But it is important to note that smaller gatherings are just as important and formative (perhaps even more so) than larger ones. We are so tempted to think along the lines of large group gatherings that we tend to even define Church in terms of the large group gathered. Acts invites us to think and to reimagine the Church differently. Even gathering in a Table Group setting is just as much “Church” as a Sunday morning worship service. With all this in mind...how do you define “Church”?

- How are you using your home as a Kingdom resource, as an outpost of the Kingdom? (Or how do you imagine you could use your home in such a way?)

### *Soul Training Exercise ~ Giving...anonymously (Or, embracing obscurity)*

Ananias and Sapphira gave a gift of money, but lied about it, in order to be perceived as giving more than they did. All of us, in some way, are tempted to want to look good in front of others, to be respected and admired by others. A good way to deal with that temptation is to embrace obscurity. One way we can do that is by doing acts of piety and kindness in ways no one else can see or know about. This is what Jesus instructs us to do in the Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 6:1-18)

So, this week, do something nice for someone...or give to someone/something...and tell no one. Resist the temptation to toot your own horn. Just keep it between you and God.

(Table Group Leaders, this would be an exercise in which debriefing about it would be counterproductive and missing the mark. Though, perhaps, a conversation could be had regarding the temptation experienced in wanting others to know about it...perhaps.)