

June 28, 2018

Third in a six-part scriptural exploration of Presbytery Leadership

Epistle Lesson

Acts 5:1-11

But a man named Ananias—his wife, Sapphira, conniving in this with him—sold a piece of land, secretly kept part of the price for himself, and then brought the rest to the apostles and made an offering of it. Peter said, “Ananias, how did Satan get you to lie to the Holy Spirit and secretly keep back part of the price of the field? Before you sold it, it was all yours, and after you sold it, the money was yours to do with as you wished. So, what got into you to pull a trick like this? You didn’t lie to men but to God.”

Ananias, when he heard those words, fell down dead. *That* put the fear of God into everyone who heard of it. The younger men went right to work and wrapped him up, then carried him out and buried him.

Not more than three hours later, his wife, knowing nothing of what had happened, came in. Peter said, “Tell me, were you given this price for your field?” “Yes,” she said, “that price.” Peter responded, “What’s going on here that you connived to conspire against the Spirit of the Master? The men who buried your husband are at the door, and you’re next.” No sooner were the words out of his mouth than she also fell down, dead. When the young men returned they found her body. They carried her out and buried her beside her husband. By this time the whole church and, in fact, everyone who heard of these things had a healthy respect for God. They knew God was not to be trifled with.

Words for the Journey

(Third in a series about Paul: the first Presbytery Leader)

When I was in the parish I somehow resisted the temptation to use this passage on Stewardship Sunday. So, what does a preacher do with this? Give everything you have or die. The Session will start paying more attention to the Real Estate section scanning for member sales!

Anybody else think maybe Peter over reacted just a little bit here!

Again, we see the tension played out between the Pauline Christians and the Petrine Christians. Peter is overseeing this transaction. Peter’s authority as an Apostle is certain. He has established his power to heal a couple of chapters previous, now he shows his inclination to pronounce death as well. Ananias and Sapphira are Greek/ Gentile converts. Their names give that much away. Here is a story of the extremes of Church discipline written by Luke, one of Paul’s biggest fans.

Any reader would see that Peter is too rigid. Absent is the flexibility of Paul to accommodate the faith to appropriate measures. By the time Luke wrote Acts the practice of wholesale communal ownership of property was long past. The Gentile and the Jewish Christian alike would see Peter’s reaction to be extreme. So, this story lends more cred to Paul, less cred to Peter.

The Jewish Jerusalem church did ask folks to sell everything and give it to the church, to quit their jobs and wait for the end. Paul however encourages everyone to keep their jobs, live moral and upright lives, tend to the needs of the poor, tend to prayer, demonstrate the fruit of the spirit. Paul was intent on removing ritual obstacles to the faith. This story would, no doubt, have alerted any Greek speaking congregation to resist the messages of those hard core, follow-the-law, Petrites who come around in pairs every-so-often talking about circumcision, kosher food and sabbath. This is the sort of story to inoculate those believers from being led astray. These are the guys that killed Ananias and Sapphira for holding on to some property.



We talk some about over-regulated and under-regulated systems; about loose-tight polarities; about cultural accommodation sorting out the essentials from the adiaphora. We bring stories of how this co-pastor transition model from one pastor to the next did or didn't work. About how we maintain the principle of open search with a non-European background congregation that is familiar with a very different model for succession. We also frame our stories to make a point, to persuade others to join the new, improved trajectory of that story into a desired future. That's just what Luke is doing in this story. Our future is not with those Petrines who will kill you for keeping stuff back, but with these Paulines who do not burden the faithful with these rules and laws, but who live into a new spirit, a moral community, with a different story than the one the Petrines will be telling.

According to Luke, who wrote Acts, Paul has that different story. Change is about simultaneously pointing to the desirable future while exposing the familiar patterns of the past as undesirable. The Petrines hope to stay tethered to a Jewish past which the Paulines see the need to depart. This story is Luke's way to subtly disparage the authority of James and Peter. And the Gentile Christians best remember it when the Petrines show up in town.

We best remember it also when Robert Jeffress excuses rancid immorality, when Paula White spews her prosperity anti-gospel, when Pat Robertson recounts a dream where Trump sat at the right hand of God (excuse me, doesn't Christ sit there??), when Franklin Graham announces that Progressives aren't Christian. The abuse of spiritual authority is all around us. We need to inoculate our believers accordingly.

Presbyteries also need to give care to whom we entrust the pulpits of our congregations. We need to give care to the spiritual formation of inquirers, candidates and pastors. We have a doctrinal range defined by our Confessions. We have an ethos of excellence in education. We understand call that involves the individual called, the congregation and the Presbytery. Someone who can pronounce JEH-E-SU-SUS-A will need to bring a well-developed mind along with that passionate spirit. We are a community which enforces doctrinal boundaries and moral boundaries; that engages in communal spiritual practices, and are continuously engaged in a shared language about our experience of the Holy One with each other and with the saints who have preceded us.

We see the patterns for this oversight in the work of Paul, the first Presbytery leader.

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