

WE ARE ALL JUST VISITORS HERE

(11/24/19)

Scripture Lessons: Acts 4:32-37; 5:1-11
Luke 12:13-34

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, and unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Luke 12:32-34)

As you know, in addition to being Thanksgiving Sunday, today is also Stewardship Sunday. You might assume that today we are going to talk about how much money the church needs to cover its operating expenses in the coming year. But we are not going to talk about that. We addressed that in the stewardship letter that went out this past week. This morning, we will examine the matter of how much *we* need as individuals and families. We will be doing this from a spiritual perspective, because stewardship is about more than raising money for the church. Stewardship is an expression of our faith, an important dimension of our spiritual life.

The Acts of the Apostles, written by Luke, describes the apostles’ ministry following Jesus’ death and resurrection. It tells of Saul’s persecution of the early Christians and, following his conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul’s missionary journeys. It recounts the martyrdom of Peter, Stephen, James, and Paul. It witnesses to acts of healing performed by the apostles. It also describes the structure of the early Christian community.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is an interesting text for us to consider on Stewardship Sunday. It begins with a description of how the early church handled its finances.

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.

This was an early type of communism, a form of communal living. No one owned anything, nor did anyone need to. I think they understood what it means to share.

The early Christians could do this because they were of “one heart and soul.” They were united in a common belief, in a common way of life, and in a common mission. Each person did not look out for him/herself; they all looked out for each other. If a member needed something, the group provided it. We do need to note, however, that scripture says that the church provided everything that a member *needed*. It does not say that the church provided everything that a

member *wanted*. There is a difference between wants and needs, a distinction that seems to have escaped many of us in this materialistic culture. The passage in Acts says,

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.

This was a decidedly countercultural form of communal living. The people of Jesus' day, just like in our day, owned personal property. They looked out for themselves and their family. Jesus challenged them to reach out past their families, past those whom they considered to be "their own kind." He called them to expand their concept of neighbor. From passages of scripture that identify Judas as the keeper of the treasury, it is possible that Jesus and his disciples really did create the kind of communal society that is described in the book of Acts. Neither Jesus nor his disciples may have owned personal property.

This model of Christian community seems a little unsettling to those of us who have grown up in a capitalistic society and have prospered within it. Compared to the standard of living around the world, we have a good deal of personal property. One indicator of the importance of this property is the amount of money that Americans spend on home security. We want to make sure that no takes our possessions. Like the people of Jesus' day, we, too, believe that charity begins at home. We take care of our family first.

Jesus challenges us to expand our understanding of family. He tells us we need to reach out to those in need. He tells the rich young man to sell all that he has and give it to the poor, that he might become a follower of the Way. We tend to give that which we feel we can spare, that which is left over at the end of the month. This was not the attitude of the early church.

Joseph, a native of Cyprus, sells a field. He lays the proceeds of this sale at the apostles' feet. This is an act of faith, an act of trust. It is based on the belief that if you give, you will receive. If you get caught up in grasping, in the desire for control, you will bring suffering upon others and also upon yourself.

Ananias, too, sells a piece of property. With his wife's knowledge, however, he withholds some of the proceeds. He lays only a part of his net gain at the apostles' feet.

Scripture doesn't say why he and his wife do this. Perhaps Ananias was hedging his bets. By appearing to throw his lot in with the others, he could draw from the common fund as he and his wife had need. But they also had a secret stash, perhaps for wants instead of needs, for

expenditures that might not be approved by the apostles. Ananias may have had doubts about following Jesus. He might have thought that if he changed his mind in the future and wanted to leave the church, he would walk away with nothing. So, he set up a contingency plan.

Peter knows immediately what has happened. He knows that Satan has split Ananias off from the Holy Spirit. Ananias is not following the Holy Spirit, but his own selfish ends. He has given in to the kind of temptation that Jesus resisted in the wilderness. Peter reminds Ananias that he didn't have to put anything in the fund. No one was forcing him to throw in his lot with the other believers. But he should make up his mind. He should be either both-feet-in or both-feet-out. In trying to play it both ways he lied to God, to the Holy Spirit, and to the apostles.

When his secret is discovered, Ananias falls down and dies. It doesn't say what he dies from. He just falls down and dies. The young men come, wrap up his body, carry him out and bury him. A "great fear seized all who heard of it." Perhaps Ananias was not the only one who was holding something back.

Three hours later, Ananias's wife Sapphira comes to where the apostles are gathered. Sapphira may have been expecting praise for laying the proceeds from the sale of their land at the apostles' feet. However, she receives something quite different.

Like a good lawyer, Peter wants to determine whether husband and wife conspired to lie to the apostles about the amount of money they actually received for the land. He asks Sapphira if she and her husband sold the land for the amount they gave to the fund. Sapphira tells Peter that was indeed the price. In this answer, Sapphira has convicted herself. Peter says,

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.

When Sapphira hears this judgment, this sentence of death delivered by the head of the church, she falls down at Peter's feet and dies. Just as Peter predicted, the young men come in, find her dead, carry her out and bury her next to her husband.

If I were a fire-and-brimstone preacher, I would suggest that this is what happens to people who do not pledge what they should. However, it seems like a strong punishment for being weak of faith and wavering in commitment. If this sentence were passed on those who withhold from the church, we would have a very small church and a very large cemetery! We

need to find a way to help people who are one-foot-in and one-foot-out make the commitment to become both-feet-in. If they do this, their faith commitment will find expression in their pledge.

Ananias and Sapphira may have actually died. The story may also be read symbolically. When we hold back from God, we die in different ways. When our possessions become so important that they split us off from life, we die inside. We become rich in things and poor in soul.

In our gospel lesson, Luke relates Jesus teaching about material possessions. Actually, the teaching is not about material possessions, *per se*, but about grasping (which Buddhists tell us will lead to suffering).

In the Parable of the Rich Fool, Jesus tells us to be on guard against any kind of greed. The man in the parable has all the possessions he could ever need, but even this is not enough. He hoards what he has. As he schemes to build bigger and bigger barns, he forgets about his soul. If he knew that his soul would be demanded that very night, he might have paid more attention to the spiritual dimension of life. His folly was in storing up riches on earth, but not being rich toward God. He forgets that he is just a visitor on this earth. He has not internalized the Buddhist teaching of impermanence.

Jesus tells us that God knows what we need to live. He also tells us that we do not need as much as we think we do. He tells us that we worry too much about the future, about making sure we will have everything we could possibly need. Our obsession with security gets in the way of our sharing. It undermines our stewardship. It closes our hearts to those who are in need. Our grasping pulls us out of a sense of community, just as Ananias and Sapphira did through their withholding what they had from the early church.

Jesus tells us to sell our possessions and give to those in need. He tells us to store up treasure in heaven. He tells us that where our treasure is, there will our heart be also. This is because heaven is our true home.

Darlene and I love to travel. We know how important it is to travel light. We know what it means to be a visitor in a foreign land. However, we invariably pack more than we need. We return home with several extra pairs of shoes, several jackets, several shirts or outfits that we never wore. We realize the pattern in this behavior; our desire to have enough outfits results in our lugging around a lot of extra stuff, stuff we didn't really need. On a deeper level, our

behavior raises the question of how much we *really* need, not only when we are traveling in Europe, but also when we are living right here in Massachusetts. I know that here, too, we have more than we actually need.

Around the end of the nineteenth century, a tourist from the United States visited the home of the famous Polish rabbi Hafez Hayyim. The tourist was astonished to see that the rabbi's home was just a simple home filled with books. The only furniture was a table and a bench.

“Rabbi, where is your furniture?” asked the tourist.

“Where is yours?” replied Hafez.

“Mine? But I'm only a visitor here.”

“So am I,” said the rabbi. “So am I.”

Today, on Stewardship Sunday, let us consider how much we really need to keep for ourselves and our family. I suspect, like the man in the Parable of the Rich Fool, we need a lot less than we think we do. I suspect that if we think of ourselves as visitors on this planet, in this world of space and time, as rabbi Hafez suggests, we will be able to travel lighter, and we will be able to share more of what we have with those in need.

If we can come to this realization, and if we place our trust in God, we will have no problem giving what is needed to meet the operating expenses of our church in the coming year.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
November 24, 2019*