

Sermon Transcript

No Hedging Your Bets

Luke 24:48-49 and Acts 4:32-5:11 | Third Sunday After Pentecost | June 9, 2024 | John Klawiter, preaching

Grace and peace to you my friends in faith,

When we read that story on Tuesday during Bible Study, I pondered what I should say first after you all heard THAT.

One woman had just sipped from her glass of water when I suggested, “I could tell the ushers to pass around the offering plates?”

Judging by the water that shot out of her nose, the group agreed... this was firmly a “no.”

Looking at the bulletin, I noticed that the sermon hymn was “I love to tell the story!”

There is not a verse in the hymn that goes “I love to tell the story, of Ananias and Sapphira dropping dead.”

“What seems each time I tell it, I’m more and more filled with dread.”

The story of Ananias and Sapphira doesn’t make it into the collection of readings that are assigned each week. However, the first half that we read—about Barnabas being lifted up for good—DOES. Perhaps that tells us something.

These two stories should be read together—a compare and contrast. An example for early believers on the heart of someone new to the community.

If anything, Peter’s biggest concern with Ananias and Sapphira is the presence of greed and sin—of Satan—joining the community. The outcome seems extreme, but that could be for dramatic effect.

If you want a good overview of the book of Acts, this story will likely be omitted. It fits firmly in the category of “that’s REALLY in the Bible?”

Yup.

Most commentaries I looked at try to solve the how. Did they have sudden cardiac arrest? Did God kill them, like some Old Testament lightning bolt shooting from a wrathful being in the sky?

Or they justified it, asking “Did they die because they held back or because they lied?”

Does any of this speculation help us today?

Sermon Transcript

Especially since we are a Christian community focused on God's love, grace, and forgiveness. Why would we even bother dwelling on Acts 5?

One commentary I watched was recommended by a friend. It's called **Tablets and Temples** (SLIDE) and the theologian had some fascinating thoughts—mostly agreeing that there are many questions about why this story is told, but we won't get a satisfying resolution.

I tend to believe one of the ideas that the story has legendary aspects that feel exaggerated to hit home to new believers about what it meant to be all in for Jesus.

I think the “so what” that really matters is why would a couple like Ananias and Sapphira, or any new couple willing to join this group, feel the pressure to fully commit?

Joining the new believers of Jesus in the very beginning was not how it is today.

There were significant consequences for joining. You left your family. You were separated from the comforts and protections of your kin to join a new “family”—the church.

Joining the church didn't mean that you could try the vibe of the megachurch church this week, hop over to the ritual and familiarity of the Catholics next week, and then come over to the ELCA church because the message of inclusivity—and that the treats were better.

No, joining Peter, John, and the Apostles that formed “the Way” meant forsaking everything you knew. You don't get to choose—this was it.

You no longer held good standing within the temple because you believed the Messiah had come. According to the leaders in the temple, that was unacceptable.

Like Jesus, they were more than willing to start putting the early Christians on trial.

You see, joining the church in the years immediately following the ascension of Jesus meant there was no turning back.

No hedging your bets.

Ananias and Sapphira see how Barnabas is admired, and they want that recognition too! Yet, they have greed and decide to hold some of the money back. Just in case things don't work out.

The reason I think this story was told was to encourage future believers to trust in Jesus. That commitment should be made with a heart for God. But that can be challenging. Imagine you want to join, but suddenly you start to question if you're fully ready to commit.

Sermon Transcript

As Yale professor Michal Beth Dinkler suggests, **“I want to caution against the perception—common among many Christians today—that the earliest Christians were uniform and/or somehow “better” than we are.” ~Michal Beth Dinkler, Yale Divinity School**

The early church went through a lot of external challenges.

Peter’s place in this story demonstrates how he perceives the internal challenges. Deceiving God, or lying in your heart, will bring consequences.

As pointed out in the Tablets and Temples podcast, there’s a pretty important story in the Bible that shouldn’t be ignored.

Isn’t there a guy in the Bible who lies. In fact, he lies not once. Not twice. But three times. He lies about knowing Jesus.

Whatever happened to THAT guy? Seriously—the consequences of THAT sin must’ve been epic.

Oh, wait. That’s right. THAT guy ends up being forgiven by Jesus after the resurrection. THAT guy is the one that Jesus tells to lead the church into the future.

That guy is Peter. The same one who condemns Ananias for lying to God.

Yet, it’s also Peter who the Spirit will continue to re-shape and re-form. Peter will get shaken out of his rigid understanding of belonging.

Peter will be a catalyst for non-Jewish people to also become Christians.

Later in chapter 5, Peter and the apostles will be arrested, but an angel of the LORD frees them. He goes to the temple to tell the story.

When he’s confronted the next morning by the chief priests, Peter says “we must obey God rather than you.”

It wasn’t that long ago that Peter was so afraid of the chief priests that it led him to deny knowing Jesus!

Peter will realize that the future of the church might mean he needs to let go of the fear of the past.

Like Peter facing a changing world, how can the past inform our future?

We are guilty of being afraid. We’re afraid that the changes we see in the culture, in church attendance, in witnessing less and less grace amongst our neighbors are a sign that the Holy Spirit has left the building.

Sermon Transcript

What would it look like for us to overcome the fear of not measuring up to the past?

What would it look like for the church of 2024 to embrace where the Holy Spirit is leading us?

There's grace here. There's forgiveness under the surface.

It requires commitment.

Are we committed to welcoming new faces that come into worship?

Are we committed to being grace-filled with each other? What about with our family? What about with someone we don't get along with?

Are we committed to welcoming everyone in our community when we're NOT in worship? How are we at being a good neighbor, especially to people that we "other"? It's hard, I know.

The church is far from perfect. The church will continue to get things wrong.

Guess what, the church has a LONG history of doing that.

This story, with all of its extreme emotions, is really a story about Peter not being afraid anymore. It's about the Holy Spirit guiding him and he trusts where it guides.

The church is made up of saints and sinners—people like you and me, and Peter, who Jesus Christ looks at and says, I did this all for you.

I sacrificed everything for you to share that good news.

Jesus was all in. Jesus was committed to us. To the world. Not to condemn us. Not to make us fear making the wrong choices.

No, Jesus commits to us, day in and day out, because we can't possibly overcome the burdens we bear on our own.

It all comes back to that promise. That commitment from Christ. Know that we are loved, no matter what. I love to tell THAT story. Amen.