

Acts 5

Vv. 1-11

The early community was in a period of peace and gratitude. They “held all things in common”

Barnabas has been lifted up by Luke as the perfect example of how the community was altogether caring for one another and in harmony.

But then we turn to chapter 5 and find the first traces of shadow on the shining community. Ananias and Sapphira step up and offer the proceeds from the sale of their field to support the community. Perhaps they were basking in the glory of the people’s praise for their generosity.

Ananias - in Hebrew means The Lord Is Gracious

Sapphira – means Beautiful

But they were neither grateful nor lovely in their dealing with the early community, according to Luke.

Certainly, this is a chilling story. But it is also one that confuses us – they sold a field and split the proceeds. What’s the problem? And why does Peter speak to them separately? They have been a duo since the beginning of the story

What’s the message to us?

For the early church, the matter of possessions was not a small one. It was a defining characteristic of the church that all were cared for in whatever needs they had. Generosity was a central focus.

What possessions do to us is in fact a matter of life or death. Unfaithfulness and deceit have entered into the community.

By lying to the community, Ananias has lied to God. And the result is their immediate death. Death by the hand of God or at the hands of heaven was a recognized penalty in the Old Testament and the Jewish law.

Peter makes the point that the couple had control over their property and over the proceeds from the sale. There are many explanations for why Ananias and Sapphira dropped dead.

One often offered up is that fundamentally Ananias and Sapphira were not really part of the community in their hearts. By lying to achieve honor they did not deserve, they not only shamed themselves but also showed themselves to be imposters in the community.

Verse 11 is the first instance in Acts in which the church is actually called “church” – ecclesia - Greek for church.

Vv 12-42

Luke follows the dark story of Ananias and Sapphira with images of the life-giving power of the gospel at work. The number of new converts was growing exponentially and the signs and wonders left the people amazed.

The apostle’s power to work wonders is changing lives. Unlike Paul, Luke conveys the apostles as having great power in the Spirit. Paul presents us with the apostles as ones whose power is made perfect in weakness.

Once more the healing, saving work of the apostles comes under scrutiny from the temple authorities – namely the high priest and the Sadducees. The apostles were arrested and thrown in prison. During the night, an angel of the Lord released them and commissioned them to continue teaching.

Not knowing of the angel’s work, the high priest, the council and the elders convened in the morning and sent for the prisoners. The temple police found the cells locked and the guards on duty but no prisoners.

Once more the apostles are taken from the temple and brought before the council.

Peter's speech is much the same as the first one in Acts 2.

Verse 33 Gamaliel, Pharisee and teacher

He suggests the council once more let them go; arguing that if these men are not from God their work will fade away. If they are from God, then the authorities don't want to be seen fighting God.