

## Sermon: Acts 4:32-5:11

### A Matter of Life or Death

-Once upon a time, somewhere in post-war Eastern Europe, there was a time of grave scarcity in which people hoarded whatever food they had. They hid it from even their friends and neighbors for fear of theft. One day a wandering soldier was seen approaching a village. And when the villagers heard he was coming down the road, they talked among themselves. "Soldiers are always hungry. But we have so little for ourselves." And they hurried to hide their food. They hid the barley in hay lofts. They hid carrots under quilts and buckets of milk down wells. They hid all they had to eat. Then they waited.

The soldier stopped at the first house. "Good evening to you," he said. "Could you spare a bit of food for a hungry soldier?" "We have no food for ourselves," the residents lied. "It has been a poor harvest. And we gave all we could to the soldiers who came before you."

At each house, the response was the same - no one had food to share. And the peasants had very good reasons, like feeding their children and caring for the sick.

"Well, then," the soldier said, "I shall have to make some stone soup to share with all of you." He pulled an iron cauldron from his wagon. He filled it with water. And he built a fire under it. Then, with great ceremony, he drew an ordinary-looking stone from a velvet bag and dropped it into the water.

By now, hearing the rumor of food, most of the villagers had come to the square. As the soldier sniffed the "broth" and licked his lips in anticipation, hunger began to overcome their skepticism. "Ahh," the soldier said to himself rather loudly, "I do like a tasty stone soup. Of course, stone soup with cabbage – now that's hard to beat."

Soon a villager approached hesitantly. He was holding a cabbage he'd retrieved from its hiding place. And he added it to the pot. "Wonderful!" cried the soldier. "You know, I once had stone soup with cabbage and a bit of salt beef as well, and it was fit for a king."

The village butcher managed to find some salt beef . . . and so it went, through potatoes, onions, carrots, mushrooms, and so on, until there was indeed a delicious stew. Tables and torches were set up in the square, and all sat down to eat. Never had they enjoyed such a feast. And they ate and drank together. Someone produced a fiddle, and they danced well into the night.

In the morning, the villagers gathered to say goodbye to their Guest. "Many thanks to you," the people said, "for we shall never go hungry now that you have taught us how to make soup from stones!" //

-This is, of course, the legend of Stone Soup. Note how the villagers originally fear for their own security. They hold tightly to what they have. And their fear leads them to tell lies about what they're holding back. Then a Guest arrives, who becomes their Host. Who invites a taste of an alternate reality, a new way of life together. A man invites them to discover abundance and sharing in the midst of what was seeming scarcity.

-Our reading from Acts for today tells the story of a community who had experienced something similar – the early church. We can think of the earliest community of Jesus' apprentices as a people who welcomed a Guest who became their Host. Who shared with them the feast of an altogether new reality. (The overlap

of heaven and earth.) Today's Scripture tells the story of the believers' freedom to live open-handedly. But it also tells the story of a major threat to that freedom – the threat that is posed by fear. Fasten your seatbelts!

This is from Acts 4.32 – 5.11:

32 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. 33 With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34 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. 35 They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. 36 There was a Levite from Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). 37 He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

5 But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; 2 with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. 3 "Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? 4 While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us[a] but to God!" 5 Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. 6 The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

7 After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price." And she said, "Yes, that was the price." 9 Then Peter said to her, "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." 10 Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11 And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

The Word of the Lord...Thanks be to God. Let's pray...

-Think of how the resurrection changed things for Jesus' apprentices. Jesus was raised from the dead! It put a divine exclamation point on the Way of his mentorship, no? Jesus wasn't making some sort of religious recommendation. He was pulling back the curtain on how heaven looks when it overlaps with earth! Peter and Andrew, James and John, Mary and Martha and all those who had come to believe alongside them were gaining eyes to see that Reality was not what they had thought, that the Truth was even more than they had hoped for. It was as if the community of believers had gotten a taste of Jesus' own stone soup. And they let their new hunger for the kingdom remake their commitment to a new kind of community.

Christ is risen! There was no reason to hoard carrots. And so they held what they owned in common. They shared. They trusted what Jesus had taught them – that persons are far more important than stuff, that there was no reason to worry about what they would eat, drink, or wear, that they could be free to seek first the kingdom and trust in God's provision. So they sold some of their stuff to make sure that their brothers and sisters had enough.

Notice that there is no coercion to give here. The people share freely. This is no plot of Communist Party leaders to get fat off the people stuck in bread lines. No. In Christ these believers recognize themselves to be persons of one heart and soul.

Notice, too, that this was not a community where every piece of property was sold. No. As Austin shared with us, and despite how this passage is phrased, believers continued to live in and meet together in homes owned by fellow believers. They just recognized that what they had was for the good of their brothers and sisters. The resurrection called for a culture of radical generosity. And that meant selling extraneous stuff to make sure everyone had enough to live on with dignity.

Here is our first brush with Barnabus, the one they call Son of Encouragement. He sells a piece of land in order to contribute to the care of the Christian community. He brings some of his carrots to help create a feast of plenty.

Now we know that the life together that's pictured here feels unnatural in a culture of isolation and individualism. It's so counter-cultural. Especially in a setting where we don't know our neighbors. Especially in a setting where our aging parents don't live with us and everyone owns their own salad spinners and lawnmowers. Especially in a culture where we binge our own tv shows at our own pace in the isolation of our own basements and curate our own stories to publish to a world of electronic friends.

We often tend to be those inclined to hide our carrots away. For good reason. Like the people of the village, our fears are rational. We're not hoarding; we're investing. We aren't interested in wealth. Just covering costs. Just comfort. Just college. Just retirement. We're not building bigger barns; just building bigger houses, bigger conveniences, bigger debts. We may be holding tightly to what we have, but we're doing it for our children, for the people we love. We're not misers. We just don't want to be a burden. And no one is going to take care of us if we don't, right? After all, we like to quote as Scripture a saying found nowhere in the Bible: God helps those who help themselves.

Is it possible we might confuse making an idol of our security with practicing the virtue of wise stewardship?

Years ago I saw a presentation by Tim Sanders. At the time he was a sales trainer for the company Yahoo. And he was talking about organizational leadership and flourishing. Sanders said then that a major threat to organizations is the fact that our culture tends to view the world from a perspective of scarcity rather than abundance. He said we tend to assume that that we don't have enough. That there's not enough to go around - not enough to share. That when others gain, we lose. And that when we give, we have less. This makes us unable to enjoy the successes of others. Instead of celebrating them, we say, "What about me?" Which makes us behave like wary competitors rather than friends and builders of community.

Sanders wanted to convince us of something he knew we didn't really believe: that our mindset of scarcity is a myth. That it's a story that exists because we breathe life into it. A self-fulfilling prophecy. We fear that there won't be enough if we share what we have. And so scarcity begets scarcity. But the truth, he said, and the God-given truth, the truth understood by early believers in Christ, is that we live in a world of God-given abundance. Of more than enough. And abundance begets abundance.

-Pastor Earl Palmer offered a parable he made famous. Say, I go into a wedding reception and find myself in a long line to the buffet. And say I look up to see that on the dessert table among all the choices is my favorite! Huckleberry pie (for Earl it was peach). But I am immediately troubled to see there is only one pie. Scarcity. And there are at least 30 people in front of me. People that are taking slices of my huckleberry pie. I begin to sweat. And to design plans on how to make a pastoral excuse for cutting in line. I become angry. And I begin to resent having had to talk to the bride's great-aunt Luceile in the parking lot. Making me late for the four – no, now 3! - remaining slices of huckleberry pie. Someone comes to talk to me, but I can't hear a word he's saying because I'm too busy keeping track of the few remaining slices over his right ear. Finally someone needs me to come unlock a door in the church basement. And I grumble inside as I leave the line and bump, not altogether accidentally, into the person carrying away my last piece of huckleberry pie.

But, Palmer would say, what would happen if when I first eyed the pie, I was encountered by the bride's mother who said, 'Oh, Dan, how glad I am that you made the reception. I know how very much you love huckleberry pie. There are ten more in the kitchen. And I just asked the caterer to save one of them warm in the oven for you to take home when you go!' Abundance! So now, when someone approaches the long line, I can say, "Please, you can step in front of me. I see there's huckleberry pie for dessert. In fact, if you'd like to have a seat, I'd be happy to bring you some....just after I get a door unlocked in the basement. By the way, have you had a chance to meet the bride's delightful Aunt Luceile?"

If a perspective of scarcity begets scarcity, do you see how a belief in the reality of abundance begets abundance?

On Wednesday night, we said that an idol is any object that we worship in place of the God we know in Christ. And Martin Luther, the great 16th century church reformer, said that the ultimate idol is security. The worship of our wellbeing that comes from our self-protective fear of scarcity.

It can hardly be a coincidence that one of the first major threats to Christ's church has to do with stuff and money.

Like Barnabus, Annanias and Saphira sell a piece of property. And they keep some of the prophet – which Peter agrees would have been quite within their freedom to do. But they attempt to deceive the Christ-following community, pretending to have given up 100% of the proceeds to the welfare of God's people. Ananias and Saphira make their security more important than God. They make a show of their sacrifice but worship their security. They lie not only to the community, but to God. Ultimately they lie to themselves about who they serve. And what happens? They're each of them struck dead on the spot. Ouch.

"But Dan," you ask. "Do they deserve to die for that?" And I guess my answer is: "That is a question above my paygrade." But let me ask you a question: What is lost when we lie? What's at stake? [Trust. Community. Koinonia Fellowship. Fidelity to God. Kingdom.]

Yes. This is a passage to keep wrestling with for sure. Not to sum up too quickly. Ananias and Saphira do die. And though it happens nowhere else in the New Testament, and though we're given no window into how this judgment may still meet with the grace of Christ, from the standpoint of Scripture the picture is theologically accurate. The result of living for our own security, embracing the myth of scarcity, hiding away our carrots, and lying to God, others and self about the stunting smallness of our idolatry leads to death.

I asked the staff what the good news is here. And they said 'the first part.' And I think that's exactly the case. The first part, the fellowship of those who trust themselves to the abundance of the risen Christ, the feast of fellowship, stone soup – is good news! So what's at stake here in our being honest with ourselves about worshipping the false god of security, believing the lie of scarcity, is nothing less than the destruction of trust, the death of the church.

It's significant that in this passage is the first use of word "church." In Greek the word is "ecclesia." It means the "called-out ones." The Church of Jesus Christ is to be the community of ones called out by his Spirit. Called out of our self-securing. Called out of our lies. We are called out to be nothing less than the provisional demonstration of the kingdom of God on earth. The locus of God.

Now Ananias, Saphira and Barnabus are all here among us this morning. All part of this worship service.

Ananias is merely being realistic. Practical. Tough-minded. Giving a little is good. But scarcity is a reality, no matter what the preacher says. You've got to take care of your family first. Nobody's got ten berry pies in the kitchen for you. There's simply not enough to go around. And who believes in stone soup anyway?

Barnabus is longing for a taste of something supernatural, a community that would sell its possessions to care for a brother or sister in need. He's longing to believe that abundance is what the church has to proclaim because of the transforming love of Christ. That radical generosity is possible. That the magic of stone soup is not mythical fantasy but the story of God's kingdom overcoming fear with a feast.

The reason I know Ananias Saphira and Barnabus are all in the room is that all persons I just described are me. Are you with me? Do you know what I mean?

Do you feel the pull of hard, cold 'realism'? That fear that there might not be enough if you were to share too much? Do you hear your need for security screaming at you to be responsible with what you have?

But do you also wonder how much would ever be enough to satisfy the god of security? Do you find it uncomfortable that on average American Christians give away only 2% of their income just like all other Americans? Do you long for the adventure we might discover together if we really trusted that true abundance is found in Christ, if we trusted that we could share significantly with one another and with our community and see our giving multiply to become more than enough?

I wonder if this is the divine wisdom of these two stories, placed side by side. That in any one of us can be found both fear for our security and faith in the One who promises to supply all of our needs.

Which will you feed?