

Read also Deuteronomy 23:21-23, Numbers 30:1-2

In a courtroom the person put on the stand, before testifying, raises his right hand and swears to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, sometimes ending with the words “so help me God.” The exact procedure varies from state to state, and even from courtroom to courtroom. But the goal is the same: to resolve cases according to the letter and spirit of the law and constitution. To do that, the court must set the stage for witnesses to tell the truth, and also create an environment where the jury believes the witness is telling the truth.

That’s the purpose of a court. Getting to the truth so a judgment can be made.

Telling the truth is a high value for the Judeo-Christian faith. God says, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

Just how significant is truth telling in our daily lives?

At our last FPCD session/leadership meeting we talked about it. We talked about a simple way to bear witness to our faith in public through integrity and truth telling. For instance, if you receive too much change when you make a purchase, would you return the excess? One of your leaders said, “I can’t imagine why it would be considered extraordinary to be honest. I can’t imagine that a person WOULDN’T return excess change.” Truthfulness, honesty, and integrity are core values to him and to those who purposely live a life of faith.

This morning we explore a situation that arose for the early church dealing with this very issue. The Bible shows the good, the bad, and the ugly about life – and about the church. I love the Bible for that very reason; what a blessing to us! The Bible is not a book of platitudes for how to live a good life, rather it tells a realistic story of the struggles we face in pleasing God. Honesty is sometimes a struggle.

Up until this point, things in the faith community have been ideal, but now an act of deceit occurs. We know, of course, that life is not perfect and it wasn’t in Bible times either. These were real people who had the same tendencies that we have. Faithfulness is sometimes hard, and this passage shows that has always been so.

Let’s read the story of Ananias and Sapphira. READ Acts 5:1-11.

This is a difficult story of judgment. Scary. Could we just tear out the page? We don’t like to hear it. This is a story about that battle which resides in all of us – to be upright when we want to be selfish; to be truthful, trusting that the rewards of serving God far exceed the cost. We all have a tendency to sin, to deceive, to take short cuts, to be less than we can be.

If you noticed our marquee on Wheatland Street, it says this: *“Everybody wants a harvest but few want to plow.”* This story is about how to plow.

God wants us to know how to plow because God wants us to be successful in our relationship with Him.

We don't really grow in faith without the plowing. Honesty is like plowing. That's the hard work that has to occur in our hearts to soften them to God's will.

The Bible says "This is what the LORD has commanded. When a man makes a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth" (Nu30:1-2).

Last summer a telemarketer named Jack, called to see if I would support the Shrine Circus. Not wanting to say no I said, "Sure, please send me a bill." Well he sent me a bill but I was going on study leave so I left it there on the counter for two weeks, unpaid. Then, when I got back home, there was a message on the recorder. *'Mrs. Hertenstein, this is Jack with the Shriners. Have you made that donation yet?'*

The bill was now shuffled in with a mound of papers on the counter and I couldn't find it. So I thought, oh well, it doesn't really matter. Forget it.

But Jack didn't forget my pledge.

He had a friend call. She said, "Mrs. Hertenstein, if you would leave a check under your door mat tomorrow I will come by and pick it up."

The next day it rained. I couldn't leave a check in the rain. That evening there was a note on the door. "Four children are depending on your pledge. Will you please pay your donation?" An envelope was taped to the door.

That was quickly followed up by phone calls from both Jack and the lady.

That's when my husband handed me the checkbook and said "write the check." I don't know why I was reticent. But a work needed to occur in my heart.

Peter said to Ananias, "The money was yours to begin with. It was yours to decide whether to give it or keep it. But this lie is to God!"

God expects us to live with integrity. Deception ruins relationships – with God and others.

Relationships take open communication and responsiveness. I learned this in marriage. You have to be in close connection to have a good relationship. You have to be honest and truthful.

Giving comes from a responsive heart. Saying you want to give and not really intending to do it breaks trust. That attitude then bleeds into other things and devastates the church. It is all built around relationship – relationship with Jesus Christ and with one another.

Ananias and Sapphira wanted the rewards, the respect, the accolades of *seeming* to give everything, but their hearts were not in it; they weren't responsive; their relationship with Christ and others was an empty shell; a deceit; and a fraud.

This does not work for God. God sees the heart. God judged their relationship with Himself and with the community and found it completely lacking.

Let's imagine Ananias and Sapphira sitting around the kitchen table talking about it. "We got a good deal for this land. Why would we give it all away? We can't give it all. What about us? How about if we save enough for a little security or for a vacation or something? I mean, we'll never have that land again. No one knows what price we got. It's a just a little. Does it really matter?"

Ananias and Sapphira were disconnected from God and did not trust God. They got anxious and greedy.

Do you lack trust in the ability of God to provide for you? Are you able to be generous, knowing you can never out-give God? Generosity is like plowing. You just have to do it.

Yet God says, "Give as you are able, as God's Spirit moves you in your heart, not reluctantly, or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work" (2 Cor 9:7). You see, when you plow, you reap a harvest.

Peter said to this couple, "You did not have to give it all. It was yours to decide."

Giving is a response of gratitude for God's gifts to you. Giving is an ebb and flow of love between you and God; trusting, receiving, and giving.

God has abundantly given to FPCD this year. Are you in that ebb and flow? Are you responsive to God's generosity to you?

Maybe there was another reason for Ananias and Sapphira's lies. Perhaps they lied because they wanted to look like really committed believers when they actually weren't that committed at all.

Let's imagine that kitchen table conversation again. "Barnabas sure is doing a lot. Everyone's always talking about how great he is. Ananias you do a lot too, and so do I! We ought to get credit for all we do! Let's just pretend we gave the whole piece of land! They'll never know it. Then we'll get the praise we deserve."

Over the years we have certainly seen the damage done by people who want the glory but are not willing to pay the cost. You have to believe there is benefit in giving; that God will take your gift to heart, and bless you abundantly. Even if you don't receive immediate rewards, plowing eventually reaps a harvest.

We will never know the reason Ananias and Sapphira chose to lie. But whether it was lack of trust in God or whether it was hypocrisy, deceit kills the church.

How important is your integrity to you? Are your words true? Do you realize its impact on those around you?

God blesses, but God judges too. Unfortunately, Ananias and Sapphira, because they clung to their lies, received God's wrath and they lost their lives.

The story is tragic. The sad thing is if they had just been honest everything would have been fine. God values real, authentic, honest seekers of God. My prayer is that we would all be people of truth, giving what we can from the heart, because we couldn't imagine being otherwise. If we live this way, nothing will be impossible for this church.

AMEN