

Sharing Love

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, a native of 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.

Chapter 5

¹ 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 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.

Theme Statement

Acts was written to explain the origins of the early church. As the mission and message of Jesus spread, questions have arisen: What will the community of Jesus' followers be like? How will they love God, and their neighbors as themselves?

Exploring the Word

In session 11 we met a house church that wondered what their identity was, and how they would know that. In this session we meet a congregation trying to define its communal life. Immediately after Peter's Pentecost address (Acts 2:14-36), "those who welcomed his message were baptized" (v. 41) and began their life in Christ by listening to the apostles' teachings, sharing holy communion, and

praying (v. 42). They sold their possessions and used the money they received to share with people in need (v. 45). Were these the rules of congregational life?

Acts 4:32-35 Great power

Deciding to hold all their possessions in common would have been a very difficult decision. The struggle might, indeed, be about sharing and not being greedy. But it could also be about their ways of responding to the danger of their situation. Israel was an occupied country. Should persecution grow and destroy the community gathered around Jesus Christ, what security would they have for themselves and their family if they had given everything away? It would be wise to have some savings.

Two “great” acts were invaluable in the decision-making processes they were using. First was the “great power” (v. 33a) with which the apostles preached to them the good news of Jesus’ resurrection. Then the “great grace” (v. 33b) of their resurrecting God filled them and led them to give their resources in response and as expressions of their compassion and mercy for one another.

This was a church filled with the Holy Spirit. But were they really united in giving everything they owned to help each other?

Acts 4:36—5:6 The Spirit and Satan

Let’s take a closer look at the “whole group” that was of “one heart and soul” about giving its possessions to the community as a whole (v. 32). Two stories that can inform readers about this situation are told by the writer of Acts.

The first story is about a man called Barnabas. He sold his field and laid the proceeds at the feet of the apostles. A wonderful act, we think, a Spirit-filled decision. But the

entire group had already adopted the practice of sharing everything they owned. Barnabas’s gift wouldn’t be remarkable. Why then was this story told?

Another field was sold by a husband and wife named Ananias and Sapphira. They abided by the community’s decision and sold land they owned, a generous act. However, they offered only part of the profit. Were they greedy or wise? If they were truly greedy, why didn’t they leave the community or hide their field’s existence? Peter harshly charged Ananias with allowing Satan (*satan* is a Hebrew word meaning “accuser” or “adversary”) to fill his heart. Peter’s cruelest words, “You did not lie to us but to God” (v. 4), are followed immediately by Ananias’s death. What about mutual conversation and consolation?

Acts 5:7-11 Death and the church

Sapphira then entered the scene and Peter confronted her harshly. Sapphira died immediately and was buried next to her husband. She, too, had no opportunity to talk, repent if needed, and be forgiven. Brokenness followed the community’s decision to pool their possessions. Greed, wisdom, fear, harsh accusations, and no opportunity for mutual conversation and consolation were terrible bedfellows.

Note that in verse 11 the Greek word for “church,” *ekklesia*, is used for the first time in Acts. That word originally meant an assembly recognized by a government official. Now the company around the apostles considered itself an *ekklesia* too.

The Word Today

“You mean we have to get downtown by 6:30 in order to serve breakfast at the rescue mission? Couldn’t we sign up for lunch?”

“A mission trip to Mexico? We need new pew upholstery more than we need that, and we can’t afford both.”

“We’re giving way too much money to the synod. We have to cut it in half right now.”

You may have heard these kinds of questions and remarks in your congregation. The discussions that ensue are wrapped around the question of how we, as Jesus’ followers, share our resources. Certainly our money is a resource, but so, too, are our building and our time. We want to protect our weekend sleep-ins, the attractiveness of our buildings, and the financial comfort of our congregations.

When I was a parish pastor, I discovered that congregations can become self-centered about money, and distorted in their ideas about it. The first congregation I served decided to resettle a Vietnamese family who had been in a refugee camp in Laos for ten years. I watched the effect that experience had on all of us. Many members learned from our new friends what it was like to be victims of violence. Their earlier, bitter argument about whether to renovate a building or build a new one was recognized as frivolous. Responding to the needs of our adopted family for shelter, beds, food, delousing, schooling, jobs, and health care was ever so much more important. Our new friends were Buddhists. We knew them as sisters and brothers whom we loved. They showed us how important it is to share with strangers and neighbors. We realized that we felt more whole because of them.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. At what time in your life has it been easiest to share with others in need? When has it been challenging?

Exploring the Word

1. The people in the early church had been journeying through a time filled with astounding events. List as many of those events as you can recall or locate in the gospels and Acts, beginning with Jesus’ arrest and execution, and ending with this session’s text.
2. Why did the people in the early church decide to give all their possessions for the community to use? Rank the following possibilities from 1 to 5, with 1 being the most likely and 5 the least.

- They didn’t want conflict to develop between people with lots and those with less.
- They wanted to live as Jesus commanded them to live.
- They wanted to develop a reserve before taking care of the poor among them.
- The community made generosity a value but failed to consider how that might be encouraged wisely.
- They wanted to establish the principle that selfless giving was better than selfishness.

3. The community is described as being “of one heart and soul.” But that agreement was contradicted by the action of Ananias and Sapphira. They weren’t “of one heart and soul” with the others. Were you or were you not surprised by this couple’s actions? Indicate with an X on the line below where you fall on the continuum.

Their action
was shocking.

What they
did was
no surprise.

4. Rewrite the story of Barnabas, Ananias, and Sapphira as if you were Jesus telling it. In what ways would Jesus' version and the Acts account be the same? How would they differ?

The Word Today

1. What possessions could you contribute to your congregation or wider community today and not even miss them? Which of your belongings could you live without, though you'd miss them if you gave them away?
2. On the line below write each item's initial or symbol to show your congregation's position on spending money for worship (W), youth ministry (Y), reaching out to people experiencing homelessness (H), decorating the building (D), sending money to regional and church-wide efforts (\$), and combating community hunger (C).

Easy to
resolve differences

Difficult to
resolve differences

Closing Prayer

Loving God, grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. We pray in the name of Jesus, the consoling, understanding, loving Son of God. Amen. (portions of the prayer of St. Francis, ELW, p. 87)

Further Study

Psalm 145; Matthew 18:21-22

Daily Readings

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|---------------------|-------------------|
| M. 1 Timothy 3:8-13 | F. Acts 2:42-47 |
| T. Acts 5:12-16 | S. Acts 4:23-31 |
| W. Acts 6:1-7 | S. Acts 4:32—5:11 |
| T. Acts 6:8-15 | |

Memorization

Acts 4:32

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.