

# First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

## *Signs and Wonders: Acts 5*

### Sunday, June 14, 2020 Sermon

#### Rev. Mark Hovermale

**Scripture (Read by Rev. Emily Campbell)**  
Acts 5:1-11

Ananias and Sapphira

*5 Now a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property. <sup>2</sup> He kept back part of the proceeds with his wife's knowledge, and brought a part of it and placed it at the apostles' feet.*

*<sup>3</sup> Then Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to deceive the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the proceeds of the land? <sup>4</sup> While it remained unsold, was it not your own? And when it was sold, was it not under your authority? Why have you conceived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to men, but to God."*

*<sup>5</sup> On hearing these words, Ananias fell down and died. And great fear came on all those who heard these things. <sup>6</sup> The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.*

*<sup>7</sup> About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup> Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for this amount?"*

*She said, "Yes, for that much."*

*<sup>9</sup> Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out."*

*<sup>10</sup> At once she fell down at his feet and died. Upon entering, the young men found her dead and carried her out and buried her beside her husband. <sup>11</sup> Great fear came on the entire church and on all those who heard these things.*

**Rev. Mark Hovermale:**

Well, as we look at Acts chapter 5 today, we're kind of sitting down relaxing here in the hearth room of First Presbyterian Church, and, you know, I think it's going to be a really interesting look at Acts, chapter 5. There are some interesting things in the book of Acts, but especially this chapter. Some really interesting things that happened there are really very important to the early church.

There's a story about Oliver Cromwell. He's an English general and statesman who led the Parliament and English army against King Charles I. He had a bunch of warts; he was just covered in them. They brought in a painter to paint him because he's very famous, and the painter painted a great portrait without any warts on it. This is where the famous phrase derives. They show the painting to him and Cromwell says, "Take it away and paint me, warts and all!"

It's a great story, because it leads into Acts chapter 5. In Acts chapter 5, two major things happen: the first recorded sin of the early church and the second thing, this was the very first time the word "church" is used to describe the early church of believers.

Reverend Emily read Ananias and Sapphira, the story from Acts chapter 5, verses 1 through 11. It shows a couple's love of power and money and greed and also praise. They were addicted to those things; they wanted those things and they misrepresented their gift.

I want you to see it as I researched it. It was *not* that they kept some of the money for themselves, they had every right to do whatever they wanted to do with the money. The difference was they *misrepresented* what they had done to the apostles in the church. They pretended they gave all the money from the sale of the land, so they could get those accolades, when really, they had kept some of the money for themselves. Even though they misrepresented what they had done, why did it result in death? Why is it a big deal? Why so harsh an outcome?

Well, as a researcher, that I went to, pointed out, the true story always comes out. You know this. If someone hides something, then eventually--it might take some months or years-- but the true story comes out. In the story of Ananias and Sapphira, two major things would have come out. First, "dishonesty pays", and the second thing was that the Holy Spirit, a major character throughout all of Acts, and, to a lesser extent, the apostles, could be fooled. This would have been devastating to the early church and to the foundation of the early church. Because of that, as the old Sunday school song says, "they both dropped dead". Interesting thought here, Sapphira the wife was given a chance after her husband died to sort of come clean. She chose not to and that was much to her demise.

A great quote from my favorite theologian William Barclay talks about this scene, of Ananias and Sapphira, and the failure of them, as the first recorded sin of the early church. He said, "There is a certain *encouragement* in this story, for it shows us that, even in its greatest days, the church was a mixture of good and bad. We would do well to remember that, if the Church were a society of perfect people, there would be no Church at all".

I think that gives us hope today as we see the unrest, the issue of racism and the violence, and the protests, and also the uncertainty with COVID-19. If you've been on social media, you know people are just at each other's throats. It's good to remember, you know, we're not perfect. The church was not perfect. In fact, in the Bible, one of the major people said they were "the chief of sinners". We're just forgiven. I think if we remember that we're not perfect; even the early church was not full of perfect people, but full of *forgiven* people, we can show grace and love to others. That is much needed in our community today as we're facing the major issues of racism and unrest in this world.

Here's the main point, the takeaway, from Acts chapter 5, Be honest with who you are and what you are doing. *Be honest with who you are and what you are doing!* People love honesty. they need honesty. They want people of faith to be authentic and honest. Don't try to mislead. That's one great takeaway from this story of Ananias and Sapphira.

Just be honest with who you are and what you're doing. Be authentic and show some flaws, rather than be dishonest and try to pretend you're something you're not. I think today in our world, and especially our community, people can use Christians that are honest and authentic

Now we come to the word "church". In verse 11, we find that it says, "This great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events". Now this is significant. It might just pass you by if you just read it, but it's the first time the word "church" is used to describe the early believers in Acts. The Greek word for church—ekklesia, was already being used for some political and other assemblies and was even used in the Old Testament for Israel when they were gathered for religious assembly. But this is the first time it's used for the early believers in Acts.

Now just a side note, the word for church back then, ekklesia, did not mean a building or a program. That came much later with a German word, kirche, which actually references, specifically, a building. That is what we think of today when we think of the word "church". We think of programs and buildings, but not the early church. They used the word "ekklesia" which was more of a movement and so they would have understood, hey, it's a movement. If you said, "Come to the building", they would have looked at you like, what are you saying? Again, it was a movement. Just an interesting side note regarding the word "church". We read it but we think of a building many times, or a program. The word ekklesia there means a movement.

Now, in the rest of chapter 5, the apostles—they're healing people and they're performing many signs and wonders among the people. In verse 12 which is one of the verses where we get the name of our sermon series on Acts, "And the crowds were gathering, people were being healed, God was on the move." As C.S. Lewis would have said, "Aslan was on the move"! Then, well, like any good story, there is jealousy. Jealousy strikes in the high priest and associates who are members of the Sadducees. You've probably heard the word "Sadducees". They were religious leaders but really, they're a Jewish group of members from the priestly line that controlled the temple. They do not believe in the resurrection or a personal savior. Basically, these are the religious head honchos. They ran the temple and these folks were not happy with the apostles because the apostles were getting all the attention and praise and they were simply jealous.

One more side note, when God works, when God gets going, usually the religious status quo and the people in charge are not happy. You see it throughout scripture that people, who should be most excited that Jesus is there, are the least excited. The same thing happened with the apostles. God was moving and the Sadducees were not happy. The apostles were thrown in jail. They're rescued by an angel at the end of chapter 5 and the angel tells them, "Go to the temple court. Do the very thing they told you not to do, which was to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ". So, get this, the high priest and associates, the Sadducees, they show the next morning. They order, "Bring these guys in from the jail." They go check the jail, they're not there. Where are they? Oh, they're in the temple court, doing the very same thing you told them not to do yesterday. So, they haul them in. The Sadducees are befuddled and angry with them, kind of wondering how they got out of jail in the first place.

When they confronted the apostles with “Why are you doing this?”, the response is a very famous line you've heard many times, probably, in the church, but this is the context of it. Peter and the other apostles say this very famous line, “We must obey God rather than human beings”. *We must obey God rather than human beings*. It's found in verse 29. Things were looking to get very heated at this point. As you may have seen on social media lately, with a very tense situation, wisdom sometimes comes from a very unexpected source. Gamaliel was a teacher of the law, and in the very last section of chapter five is recorded his speech to the religious leaders. Here's basically what he says, “Be careful what you're going to do in this current situation”. And then he gives two examples of two different guys who pretended to be, as he said, somebody or something. They each led a group of change against the government, and then when these guys were killed, each separately, as separate movements, their movements and their people disbanded. The movements just kind of went away. “Therefore”, he says, “in the present case, I advise you to leave these men alone. Let them go, for if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail but if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men. You will only find yourselves fighting against God.”

Wise words, and it brings us to our final main point, be thoughtful and patient in making decisions. *Be thoughtful and patient in making decisions*. In dealing today with challenges, with social media and all these things out there, you can post instantly. What I'm seeing from all different types of people is that people are not showing thoughtfulness and patience when they say something, or when they post something. They act from emotion and anger and they don't think through, “is this a wise thing to say; what will this do, will this be hurtful?” In our interactions with people, both online or by phone or even in person, with decisions you make, one thing we can draw from Acts, at the end of chapter 5, is we need to be thoughtful and patient in making decisions, just like Gamaliel was in his advice. At the end of the story, the pharisees and the religious leaders were persuaded. They said, “All right, we'll let them go.”

At the very end, and I'd be remiss if I didn't talk about this, but it kind of makes it complicated. At the end, the apostles are flogged and told not to speak in the name of Jesus. In response, they rejoice that they were counted worthy of suffering for Jesus and they never stopped preaching his name.

Can I tell you something, to be a little vulnerable with you? That would not have been my response. I would have been angry that I was flogged. I didn't do anything wrong; I did what Jesus wanted, what the Angel told me to do when getting out of jail, and I was flogged! Yet, here's the key, the apostles saw the long view. Just like Emily talked about last week in her sermon, they knew that Jesus was at the center and that the name of Jesus, the gospel of Jesus Christ, was the only thing that could change their world. Because of that, they considered their flogging to be a *blessing*, they were worthy of suffering for Jesus! They went on and preached his name continually.

I think we need that today. Our world is hurting for a lot of reasons and there's a lot of answers being thrown around. What we can learn from Acts chapter 5 and, frankly, the whole book of Acts is this: Jesus was at the center of the early church. His ministry, his life, the gospel of Jesus Christ was at the center, even when they had tough times. We can take that to heart today, in 2020. What we say, how we interact, how we try to

change this world, needs to be through the lens of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's what we can learn from Acts chapter 5.

Amen and thanks be to God.