



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

October 6, 2013

"Stars Or Heroes" (Book of Acts Series) — Acts 4:32-5:11

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I asked a couple of my pastor friends, "Hey, would you send me the last sermon you preached on Ananias and Sapphira? I'd love to get your take on what's going on in Acts chapter 5." They all told me, "I don't have a sermon on Ananias and Sapphira!" And I knew what they thinking in the silence that followed that confession. "Who, in their right mind, would preach on Ananias and Sapphira?" But they all said, "I'd love to hear what you come up with, Tim!" After studying our passage this week I can see why lots of people skip the first eleven verses of Acts 5! This is a tough text.

If hypocritical people were still keeling over in church, we'd have to have a full-time undertaker on staff just to deal with what would happen to guys like me. The truth is, sometimes I can still act more like Ananias and Sapphira than Barnabas. Barnabas, the "Son of Encouragement", is one of my heroes. I want to be more like him some day. Thankfully, Jesus Christ is hard at work in my life, freeing me from the hypocrisy that plagued Ananias and Sapphira. But I have a ways to go before I become the kind of generous, gutsy, heroic guy that Barnabas was.

Let me put this passage in its larger context. In Acts chapters 3-5 we're watching what happened

when some very powerful people in the first century turned on the early church. And we're also watching how the leaders and the people of the church responded. The authorities tried to shut the apostles up and shut the church down. That persecution went on for about 250 years until Constantine legalized Christian worship in the year 313.

In Acts chapters 3-5, we get to watch some people do some pretty heroic things in the face of tremendous danger. Peter and John stand up to the threats of the religious leaders who tell them to stop talking to the people about Jesus. But Peter and John, filled with the Holy Spirit, decide to do something heroic. Because they were committed to something bigger than themselves, they were able to look the religious authorities in the eye and tell them that they were going to continue to do what God had told them to do. They would keep talking about Jesus. That was an act of heroism.

Barnabas also did something heroic. He sold a piece of property he owned on the island of Cyprus. He was not going to allow his life to be consumed with his own need for security. He saw people in need and knew that he could do something to help them. So, at great risk and great cost to himself, he sold a

piece of land he owned and brought the money to the leaders of the church who used it to support people who were in need. That's also what it looks like to do something heroic.

In Acts chapter 5 we also have the story of a couple by the name of Ananias and Sapphira who were anything but heroic. I can empathize with these two people. They were more interested in making an impression than living a life of integrity. It seems like they wanted to impress the crowd but were apparently not interested in being people of real character. For whatever reason, they felt the pressure to pretend that they were more committed to Christ, that they were more spiritual, than they actually were. They were acting and their hypocrisy threatened the very fabric of the Christian community.

Tim Keller, who is the Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, got me thinking about the difference between being a hero and being a star—between doing something heroic and doing something to receive the praise of others. We're going to talk about that a little more in just a minute. But before we take a look at these verses in chapters 4 and 5 of Acts, I want to come right out and tell you the main point of my sermon today.

**R**ight up front, I'm going to tell you the take home message I hope you'll hear. And then I'm going to walk us through this text and show you why I think this is one of the main points of the passage.

Here's what I hear God saying to us in the story of Ananias and Sapphira: Be authentic. Be genuine. Be real. Don't be a hypocrite. We don't have to pretend that we're more spiritual than we are. The Gospel of Jesus Christ sets us free. To be a follower of Christ means we have the freedom to acknowledge who we are right now. We don't need to fake it.

The apostle Peter plays a prominent role in the story of Ananias and Sapphira. So, I want to jump out of this text in the Book of Acts and look at an experience Peter had with Jesus. After His resurrection, Jesus had a talk with Peter about what happened outside the High Priest's home on the night that Jesus was arrested.

If you know anything about Peter, you probably already know about this embarrassing story from his life. Before Jesus was arrested, before Jesus was put on trial, before He was crucified, Jesus gave Peter a heads up that Peter was going to cave when the pressure was on. Peter was going to deny that he was associated with Jesus. And Peter was going to do that in order to save his own skin. Peter did deny Jesus three times and when he realized what he'd done, he ran from the courtyard of the High Priest a broken man.

When Peter promised Jesus that even if every other disciple ran in fear, he wouldn't. He wasn't pretending. He wasn't being a hypocrite. He genuinely wanted to

do something heroic...and he failed. That's not what Ananias and Sapphira do in Acts chapter 5.

After Jesus rose from the dead, He met Peter and the other disciples back at the Sea of Galilee. They'd gone back to their old profession. They were fishing. It's there, after breakfast, along the Sea of Galilee, that Peter and Jesus talk it out. What happens in that conversation is extremely important for Peter and it's extremely important for us.

Before we head back to the Book of Acts, let's take a look at John chapter 21 verses 15-17. Jesus asks Peter the same question three times. John 21:15, "When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Feed My lambs."

The first time Jesus asks this question he points to the other disciples and asks, "Peter do you love Me more than these other guys do? Remember, you once claimed that you did. You said that even if everyone else denies me, you never would."

Look at Peter's answer. He demonstrates a new humility in the way that he responds to Jesus this time. He simply affirms what Jesus already knows. Peter does love Jesus, just not more than his other friends.

One thing that is extremely interesting to me is that in his first question, Jesus uses a different Greek word for love than the word for love that Peter uses when he answers Jesus' questions.

**John 21:15** - *When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love (agape) me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love (phileo) you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs."*

There are a number of words for love in Greek. Two different words for love are used in this conversation between Peter and Jesus. The word "agape" refers to the kind of unconditional love God has for us and the word "phileo" refers to the kind of love that exists between good friends.

Thinking back to Peter's claim that he would never deny that he knew Christ, Jesus asks Peter, "Do you have unconditional love for Me Peter? Do you have the kind of sacrificial love that I have for you?" And Peter simply says, "You know that I have the kind of love for You that a friend has for another friend. I don't have unconditional, sacrificial love for You, Jesus, at least not yet." Something important has begun to change in Peter. He knows himself better now. The Lord then tells Peter to take care of his church.

Jesus asks Peter a second time if he loves him. He doesn't ask Peter if he thinks he loves Him more than his friends. They've dealt with that. Peter's love for Jesus wasn't greater than the love the other disciples had for Christ. But once again Jesus uses the word agape and Peter answers in the affirmative using the word phileo.

**John 21:16** *A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love (agape) me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love (phileo) you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep."*

**T**here's one more super important issue Jesus wants to talk with Peter about. For the third time, Jesus asks him the same question, "Do you love Me?" This question really hurt. Peter was bummed when Jesus asked him a third time about his love for Him. The third time stung. But it stung like an antiseptic can sting when you're cleaning out a wound. The pain is going to be worth it.

Jesus was doing the work of a healer. Peter had denied Jesus three times and Jesus has now given him the opportunity to affirm his love for Him three times. But the most significant thing Jesus does is wrapped up in the word for love that Jesus now uses in his third question to Peter. This time when he asks Peter, "Do you love Me?" Jesus uses the word for love that Peter was using in his answers. Peter do you have the love of a friend for me? And Peter, for the third time says, "Yes. That's the kind of love I have for you."

**John 21:15** *He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love (phileo) me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love (phileo) me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love (phileo) you."*

Peter knows himself. His failure has shown him more about who he is right now. He's being real. He's being honest. His understanding of who he is at this point in his life is much deeper than it was before Jesus was arrested. His failure had taught him some very important things.

Here's what I think Jesus was trying to help Peter understand. "Peter it has always been okay with Me that your love and devotion to Me is imperfect. It's okay with Me that your love for Me right now is

the kind of love two friends have for one another. Don't create a myth about yourself. Be authentic. Be real."

That kind of authenticity that Jesus is showing Peter in this conversation was to stand at the center of the Christian community. And it was that authenticity that was in danger when Ananias and Sapphira did what they did. Peter failed to live up to his best hopes for himself. He wasn't pretending to be something he wasn't. He simply failed to be who he wanted to be. Jesus tells Peter that He's got a job for him to do.

Let's head back to the Book of Acts. Ananias and Sapphira acted hypocritically. They were pretending to be something that they weren't. That wasn't Peter's story.

**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. 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.*

**Acts 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!"*

The danger of hypocrisy is what's on display here. It's dangerous for us and it's deadly for the Christian community. Hypocrisy threatened the life of the early church and that's probably why the consequences were so severe. Hypocrisy has hindered the ministry of the church more than almost anything else. Hypocrisy comes from a Greek word that means "to act, to pretend to be someone you're not."

In the first century an actor wore a mask while they were on stage. Hypocrisy is a form of deception. Ananias and Sapphira were acting hypocritically.

There's a big difference between Barnabas and what he does in Acts 4:34-37 and what Ananias and Sapphira do in Acts 5:1-11. I think Barnabas is interested in doing what is right, whether anyone seems him doing it or not. He was a person who was growing in integrity. Ananias and Sapphira were looking for the applause of the crowd by pretending to be more than they were.

In these chapters of the Book of Acts we're witnessing the first persecution to break out against the early church. The response of the leaders of the young church, for the most part, was one of heroism. Peter and John were heroes. Risking it all, they stood up for what they knew to be true even though it put them in an extremely precarious position with the religious authorities.

Barnabas was also a hero. Barnabas was committed to something that was greater than his own self-preservation. He was interested in doing something that would be a benefit to others even if it cost him a much. He sold a piece of property so that those in need could be helped.

Up to now, the attacks on the early church were coming from outside the church. Here in Acts chapter 5, the attack on the church comes from within the church itself. The deception of Ananias and Sapphira threatened the trust that had grown among the people of the early church. To deceive others is to betray them. Deception is about being a fraud. When we act hypocritically we are trying to dupe others into thinking something about us that is not true. We delude, we hoodwink, we bamboozle, we scam, we take advantage of others when we deceive them.

Ananias and Sapphira watched the generous, sacrificial act of Barnabas and the affirmation and applause he must have received from the people of the church and its leaders. It looks like Ananias and Sapphira sought the applause of others but they were unwilling to follow in the footsteps of the heroes that were around them. They pretend to be more spiritual than they actually are.

When they sold their property and brought the proceeds to the apostles they left the impression that they'd given it all to the church. That was a lie. Ananias and Sapphira could have followed a heroic path by simply telling the apostles that they had sold some property they owned and were giving some of the proceeds to the church. Nothing required that they sell their property in the first place. Nothing required them to give it all to the church. They could have kept some of the proceeds for themselves.

It wasn't the size of their gift that was the issue. It was the fact that they pretended to be something that they were not that threatened the integrity of the early Christian community. Ananias and Sapphira were more concerned with how they looked to others than who they were as followers of Christ. They preferred being stars to the costly work of being heroic.

What happens to Ananias and Sapphira is shocking. This story comes painfully close to home. All of us are familiar with trying to be stars instead of heroes. We're afraid to be authentic and we're afraid to follow in the footsteps of the heroes we meet here in the Book of Acts. We can sometimes be more like Ananias and Sapphira than we are like Barnabas. We long to be like Barnabas. I know I do. We want to live heroic lives and not lives of hypocrisy. That's why we need a Savior.

The only thing that can begin to cure us of this tendency to be inauthentic—the only thing that can help us live more heroically—is to see that Jesus Christ is the true hero who has

given it all so that we might begin to live more authentic and more heroic lives. Jesus Christ was committed to something greater than his own self-preservation. Jesus Christ gave everything He had so that we might have what we so desperately need: God's love, God's forgiveness, a hope that is secure that we can rebuild our lives upon. That's what this communion Table today is all about.

I know of a church in Colorado that has shirts that simply say, "Me too" on them. What they're trying to convey to one another and to the world is that they too have made mistakes; they too have failed to be the people they wanted to be. "Hey, so you've messed up your life. you've hurt yourself and others. Well, you know what? Me too."

What Ananias and Sapphira did encouraged other people to pretend, instead of saying, "Me too." This Table sets us free to say, "Me too. I need a Savior." The good news of the Gospel is that we have a Savior who says, "It's okay with Me that your love for Me right now is not perfect. Don't create a myth about yourself. Be authentic. Be real." Because, it's when we're honest, it's when we're real, that Jesus Christ meets us and begins to transform us so that we might live more heroic lives.

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*Note: The Rev. Dr. Tim Shaw is an associate pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu. Sunday sermon texts are also found at [fpchawaii.org](http://fpchawaii.org). The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes or [fpc.posterous.com](http://fpc.posterous.com). It can also be sent to you by e-mail. Request the free audio version: [fpchkoolau@gmail.com](mailto:fpchkoolau@gmail.com)*