

Sunday, November 10, 2019
First Presbyterian Church of Redlands - Rev. Cheryl Raine

First Reading is Deuteronomy 15:7-11

⁷ If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. ⁸ You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. ⁹ Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, "The seventh year, the year of remission, is near," and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt. ¹⁰ Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. ¹¹ Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."

Second Reading is from Acts 4:34-5:11

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.

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.

The Message I entitled, *What's Your Motive?*

"If there is among you anyone one in need... do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor." If there is anyone... this past week I attended the San Bernardino County Homeless Summit and it was apparent by the over 300 people in the room that there is need among us. Employees from cities, school districts, medical providers, police departments, faith communities and non-profits were present as well as San Bernardino county employees. "If there is anyone in need?" was not the

question. It was a given. The reality is that there is tremendous need among us and the need is complex. So complex that one of the presenters was the Senior Director of Community Health from the Inland Empire Health Plan or IEHP. This organization has a new \$10 million initiative to provide housing for high-need members, because “whole person care” saves them money! Housing their highest need members, which translates into an individual who is homeless, is cost effective.

I remember seeing this idea first on the medical television drama *New Amsterdam* where Dr. Max Goodwin housed one of their frequent flyers in an apartment to provide him stability and substantially reduce his emergency room visits. In the television drama, they actually ended up hiring the frequent flyer as a hospital concierge and the combined efforts of housing and employment plummeted the cost of his care for the hospital.

This need which is an epidemic in our society is complex. It includes thinking strategically about city zoning so that supportive and affordable housing can even be built. It includes wrap-around social services by providers to reenter people into the mainstream of society. It includes addressing the fastest growing population of those struggling with homelessness, senior adults! Those without homes though are not the only ones in needs. I learned that San Bernardino County, just like Orange County, has lots of families living in hotels, because these families cannot afford the first and last payments to move into an apartment or they don't have enough monthly income to qualify to rent.

Even after my work in this area for over five years, I heard a statistic that was alarming though: 9 out of 10 needs can't be met by current resources! That means that the resources and the needs don't match. Those in need county wide are overwhelming and the need affects our city as well, as we have the third largest homeless population in San Bernardino County, with 183 identified during the Point in Time Count conducted this past January. The number includes both unsheltered and those sheltered in temporary housing. “If there is anyone,” writes the author of Deuteronomy, “do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor.” Yet, can we imagine a world, a community or even a faith community where there would not be a needy person among us?

In the opening pages of the Acts of Apostles we have the incredible growth of the early church with three thousand people responding to Peter's first sermon. “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” [Acts 2:44] Numbers were added again and again because people saw the transformation taking place in the community of believers. The early church continued to grow and support those with needs.

This morning we first heard that Barnabas sold a field and brought all the proceeds to the apostles to be shared. But, Ananias and Sapphira did something different. They sold a piece of property just like Barnabas, but they held back a portion for themselves.

What was their motive to sell in the first place? Was it gratitude for what God had done or a desire to be visibly generous in their community? What was their motive to hold back a portion of the proceeds? Was it fear? Was it for their retirement account? Was it because they were hard-hearted or tight fisted? Whatever drove them to hold back a portion, also drove them to lie about the proceeds. Now it should be noted that no one was forced to sell. That is why Peter said, “While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own?” In their possession it was all theirs. I don't believe that either Barnabas or Ananias and Sapphira sold all their property, they just sold a piece of property. All property was not liquidated. It's just that some had property they could contribute for the greater good of the community of believers so that no one would be in need.

The difference between Barnabas and Ananias and Sapphira reminded me of the theatrical sermon we experienced last week entitled, *A Grain of Hope*, and the difference

between Abigail and Naomi. Abigail called in a debt taking all the grain of a neighbor in the midst of a very bad harvest, whereas Naomi said, “We had a bad harvest, too. [But] we can share a bushel.” Naomi chose to trust in the Lord and to share with others from the limited resources she had. Another line spoken provides wisdom for the sermon today as well, for Esther said, “Fear is a bad advisor.” Indeed, if fear was Ananias and Sapphira’s advisor, fear cost them their lives.

The Spirit spoke to Peter for he boldly declared to Ananias when he presented the proceeds, “You did not lie to us, but to God!” We may be able to fool others with our generosity, but God knows our hearts. That is, God tests our hearts, even when our actions “look good” on the outside. Or as Jesus said to the scribes and Pharisees, “You are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of bones and all kinds of filth.”

What was their motive? Do you think Ananias and Sapphira were looking for some kudos or status within the community for generously sharing what they had with others? Although, we will never really know their motive, we know the result. The amount they withheld did them absolutely no good.

What about us? What is your motive for giving? What motivates you to participate actively in this particular faith community? What motivates you to give of your time as a volunteer within our church and in our community? What motivates you to give of your financial resources for the life and ministry of this church or to other non-profit organizations in our community and around the globe?

Motive is simply understanding why we do what we do, individually and communally. I remember being challenged to describe my motive for entering full-time ministry in a continuing education course I took in 2017. I certainly felt a call by God initially, but the question posed was what motivates you day after day in the throes of ministry to continue in ministry. Why do I do what I do instead of something else. As I spent time reflecting on this question, my motivation for ministry came with incredible clarity. What motivates me is “connecting head to heart.” What motivates me is helping others connect their knowledge about God into a lived experience of God. Not only to know about God’s love, to be known in the depths of one soul as loved by God, for connecting our heads to our hearts is transformative.

What motivates us as a church has been recently recrafted into a statement by your leadership team. We aspire to be motivated day in and day out by “Living the heart and mind of Christ at the heart of the city,” and I’ll add, for the glory of God. We do what we do as a church and I do what I do as a pastor so that others might be drawn to our amazing God and be transformed by the power of the Spirit at work within them. Why else would we take a piece of our property and repurpose it to be bless our community. Why else would we begin to dream dreams about our lower level becoming a hub of activity for our community.

We know from scripture that the heart and mind of Christ is generous. Our triune God created the cosmos and each one of us. God loves us long before we can love God in return. God dwelt among us through Jesus, demonstrating how to be fully human by living generously, even sacrificially. God’s mercy is new every morning. God is always ready to welcome us prodigal children home. God is ever faithful, never giving up on us either. Imagine living fully into this generosity that God freely gives us!

Yet, the cultural pull to only be concerned with “me, myself and I” or with our own church is incredibly strong. Fear all too easily takes root and motivates us to worry like Abigail did calling in a debt at the worst possible time, choosing not to share in the midst of a bad harvest. Fear

causes churches to hold onto resources and only be concerned with survival, too. Episcopal priest Eric Law reminds us of God's generosity saying, "God owns everything and God gives abundantly. We are not to keep God's resources; we are to circulate these resources" [Holy Currencies, page 7]. For when we do this God's blessings are then recycled to create more blessings.

This was our Young Disciple Time today. There was a finite amount of resources, only so many index cards. Yet, as we willingly shared them with each other and continued to share them with others, everybody had some. As long as we are sharing with each other there will be enough.

When I think of our future park, I wonder how our willingness to share will recycle God's blessings to create more blessings? As we spend time in the park meeting those who stop in, what new relationships might be formed? What new needs might we come to know about, only to realize we have the resources to address them? What new connections will happen to bless us? How will God create blessings we can't yet imagine through Vine Street Community Park?

Eric Law learned as a child that "water is money." He often heard people use the Cantonese word "water" in the place of money. He then wrote in his book entitled, *Holy Currencies*, "Perhaps we should think of the currency of money or any other currency (our time, our talents, our possessions) as being like water. He suggests this because when water does not flow, it creates opportunities for destructive things to grow." It becomes stagnant and a breeding ground for mosquitoes and more. He continues writing, "The same thing goes for money and resources: when they are not flowing, or when we hold onto them, they turn rotten and become a breeding ground for trouble and unsustainability" [Holy Currencies, page 9].

As we begin to consider how God might be motivating us to give of our currency of money to address needs in our community through the life and ministry of this church in the coming year, I invite you to spend some time in prayer. Ask God to help you live the heart and mind of Christ ever more fully, through all the currencies that can flow through your life like water to bless others – your time, your talents, your financial resources. Let's all be more like Barnabas and Naomi, and not like Abigail and Ananias and Sapphira.

"If there is among you anyone one in need... do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted." Let's give liberally and be ungrudging, as we recirculate what God has already generously given us to bless this church and the community we have been called to serve. Amen.