Sunday, November 18, 1979
USE IT OR LOSE IT
Acts 4:32-35, 5:1-11

When I read this story about Ananias and Sapphira in preparation for this sermon this past week, it caused me to remember a comedy routine by Jack Benny which is said to have gotten the longest laugh for a period of silence of any comedy routine ever performed. In the routine, Mr. Benny is stopped one evening by a hold-up man who puts a gun in his back and says, "Your money or your life." After a long period of silence, the robber jabs the gun again in Mr. Benny's back and asks what's taking so long. Mr. Benny replies, "I'm thinking it over."

Apparently, Ananias and Sapphira did not take time to think it over, and they paid with their lives, but for a different reason. They were not the victims of a hold-up man, but the victims of their own deception and guilt. They claimed that they had so1d some 1and and had given a11 the proceeds to the church, when in reality they had sold some land and had given -0nly some of the proceeds to the church. The Apostle Peter learned of their deception and confronted Ananias with the facts. He pointed out that he had not lied to the church, but to God. When Ananias heard this, he fell over dead. A short time later his wife Sapphira was confronted with the same facts, and she died.

This morning let's consider what this story from the book of Acts has to say to us as we are considering what our financial support of the church will be for the coming year. The story makes at least three points.

1. First the story reminds us to "PUT UP OR SHUT UP." Let your words and your actions be the same. Do not try to deceive God. You will always be found out. Ananias and Sapphira were not compelled to give all the proceeds of the sale of their land to the church of which they were a part. In fact, they were not compelled to give anything, just as each one of us is not compelled to make a pledge to the church or to give money at any time. It's our own decision to make. And that's exactly what the Apostle Peter told Ananias.

The mistake of Ananias and Sapphira was in saying that they had given all the proceeds, but actually had not. In the eyes of the public, they wanted to appear to be generous givers, but in the eyes of God they were hypo-crites. Like Ananias and Sapphira, many people are tempted to live behind deceptive facades and in so doing deceive themselves and others.

We can make the same mistake. So, the story reminds us to "Put up or shut up," to be honest about our giving. Frequently I've met people who've said, "I'm giving all that I can afford." But that's not really the truth. What they should say is, "I'm giving what is left over after I've taken care of everything else I wanted to do." At least that would be an honest statement of fact. Or one could say, "I don't think the church is very important in my life or in our world, so I'm giving just a token amount." The person might go on to say, "Other things are much more important in my life right now." I can deal with that kind of statement. At least the person is being truthful.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira says, "don't try to deceive God or anyone by saying you're giving as much as you can afford. Have you met very many of our members who do not have enough food to eat or clothes to wear? Have you met very many of our members who are driving a lot less because of the price of gasoline? Do you know of anyone who has quit smoking because he or she couldn't afford it? Put up or shut up."

Here's a suggestion. Try giving off the top instead of off the bottom. Giving off the bottom is the process of giving or pledging to the church after you've purchased everything else you want. Giving off the top suggests that we give or pledge to the church before our other spending. You'll discover that all your needs will then be met.

2. Secondly, this story of Ananias and Sapphira reminds us of another old saying about money and giving — "You can't take it with you.91 Most of us are aware of the truth of this statement, but we act at times as if it were not true. Many people behave as if they are going to be able to take their money with them.

A church canvasser was making a call. The man of the house said as soon as they sat down, "Pardon me if I seem abrupt, but I've had a hard week and would appreciate it if you would make this short. I've been going to church all my life and there's no need to give me a sales pitch. Furthermore, I need all the money I have and can't afford to give very much away. Besides the church costs too much money these days. Its budget is much too large."

The canvasser gulped and then said he would like to tell a true story which related to what the man had been saying. Defensively, the host said, "Ok, go on."

The canvasser began, "About 35 years ago, a boy was born in our family. My wife and I were young, struggling on a small salary, deliriously happy with our new child, but still wondering how we would meet all the expenses. But we kept our son. From the moment we knew the child was coming, he began to cost money. Clothes, food, doctors, drugs. We found love doesn't count the cost. It only enjoys the privilege. We kept our son.

He grew into a sturdy young man, bringing us the kind of happiness I can't describe. He didn't bring in a single penny. The older he got the more he cost. But love doesn't count the cost. It looks only for ways to express itself. We kept our son.

We remember the day he started working part-time in the local drugstore. The experience was more valuable than the pay. When he began dating, we often found ourselves paying for two instead of one. But we kept our son.

He had a fine mind. We knew he was college material. Off to college he went after high school. How we missed him. We missed his off-key singing, his keeping us awake with his stereo, his arguments with us about all sorts of things. It was right after Christmas vacation his senior year in college that we received a call from the school saying that our son was seriously ill with a rare disease. Within a week after that our son died. We brought his body home and had the memorial service at the church and paid all the expenses, but we couldn't keep our son any longer.

Our son hasn't cost us a penny since. The dead never do. The fact is, my friend, anything alive, whether it is a boy or girl, or church, is going to cost and cost and cost. And the moment it stops costing, it's too late.

The clock in that comfortable home was reported as being strangely loud in the quiet that followed. You can't take it with you.

3. Thirdly this story of Ananias and Sapphira reminds us of another old saying about giving, USE IT OR LOSE IT. Ananias and Sapphira held back, deceived themselves and lost it all.

Use it or lose it. Here's a principle that applies to all of life. If I stop using the muscles in my body, they will atrophy, shrink, and become useless. The more regularly I use them, the stronger and more effective they become. The same is true of my mind. The more I use my thinking processes, the more improved and useful they are. The parable of the talents which Jesus told makes the same point. Those who were given talents and used them produced more and those who did not, lost them.

Use it or lose it. That part of us, which is never invested in human life, what we hold onto most tightly, is what we will lose. God has given us all what we need and has given many of us more than we need. If we do not use these gifts, invest them in other people, then we become like dead Christians.

The greater the investment, the greater the return. The more you give, the more you eventually receive. The less you give, the smaller you feel.

A man went hunting with his companions. In the search for game, he became separated from his friends and could not find his way back to camp. Night fell. A severe storm began. To protect himself he crawled into a hollow log. The rain poured down all night long. In the morning when the man awoke, he found that the log had swollen, and he was hopelessly stuck inside. He thought he would die trapped in the log. Like a dying m.an, his whole life began to pass before his eyes. He thought of his wife and children. He thought of his colleagues at work. He thought of his friends. He thought of the friends he had made in the local church. As his thoughts lingered on the church, he remembered the size of his pledge to this year's stewardship campaign and when he remembered the size of the pledge, he felt so small that he slipped right out of the log.

There is a positive side to this principle of use it or lose it. When we risk and use what we have, miracles often occur. In some mysterious way, God multiplies our giving.

Years ago in Philadelphia, a little girl came to Sunday School and asked to be taken into one of the classes. The classes were full, and the church was so small that there seemed no place for her. Her desire to find a place in that Sunday School fired her with zeal to see the church made larger, to provide room for more children like herself. Without speaking to anyone she began to save pennies to help build that bigger church. Not too long after the little girl died, but under her pillow was found an old red pocketbook in which were 57 pennies and a scrap of paper on which was written the reason why she was saving her pennies.

The minister who conducted the funeral told the story of those 57 pennies and it got into the newspapers. What could a little girl's 57 pennies do? Well, they did much. The tide of gifts which her example inspired flowed with increasing strength and in six years the 57 pennies had become $250,000 which became the nucleus of yet grander things, for the Baptist Temple with its Good Samaritan Hospital, and the great Temple University with its thousands of students, have come into being as the marvelous harvest of a little girl's devotion. It all begins when we give and use what we have. Use it or lose it.

I wonder about the many miracles that will be brought about as a result of the silver dollars we gave out earlier to the children this morning. Who knows what the miraculous results will be when we give and God does the multiplying?

One final note before you write the end to this sermon. For the past several weeks we've all felt the tenseness as a result of the hostages being held in Iran, and we've felt sorrow because

of the refugee situation in Cambodia. Such events make us more conscious of the heritage we've inherited in this country. Our country was founded on a deep religious faith and our basic freedom comes from this faith. In these days more than ever we need strong and vital churches.

Today when we make our pledges for the support of this church it's also a statement of our commitment to freedom and to the best of what our country stands for. Amen.

Although it's not printed on the program, as the ushers pass out the pledge cards, let's sing, "God Bless America."

As you make out your pledge cards, consider this: do not take the easy way out and simply put down what you pledged last year. As a guide to your thinking, begin your consideration by asking what it would be like if you gave one dollar per week for each $1000 of annual income. Thus, if your income is $5000, per year that would be a pledge of $15 per week.

Our budget for 1980, is a little over 10% higher than this year. This means that many of us are going to have to increase our pledges more than 10% because of the many in our congregation who are on fixed incomes and may not be able to increase their pledges at all.