Sunday, November 6, 1994
USE IT OR LOSE IT
Acts 4:32-5:11; Mark 12:41-44

When I read the story about Ananias and Sapphira in preparation for this sermon, I was reminded of a classic Jack Benny comedy routine. 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 thief jabs the gun more insistently in Mr. Benny’s back and then asks what’s taking so long. Jack Benny replies, “I’m thinking it over.”

In this story from the book of Acts about the First Church in Jerusalem, Ananias and Sapphira didn’t take time to think it over, and they paid with their lives — but for a different reason.

The story goes like this: People were bringing their pledges to First Church in Jerusalem — grateful responses to God’s goodness and to meet the needs of the church and those around them. People were generous in their offerings. Barnabas made a killing in real estate and gave the entire proceeds to the church. His gift was so noteworthy that it was written up in the church newsletter and eventually mentioned in Luke’s book, Acts of the Apostles.

Other members of the congregation, Ananias and Sapphira, also owned some real estate. They sold a property, and Ananias brought an offering to the church, claiming it represented the full proceeds from the sale. But Peter, who obviously knew what real estate was worth in Jerusalem in those days, realized something was wrong. Peter knew that Ananias had held back a portion of the proceeds.

In front of the whole church, Peter accused him: “Ananias, you’ve held something back. You are lying to us, and more importantly, you are lying to God.” Right then and there, Ananias dropped dead. The people who witnessed this were filled with fear. Who can blame them? Then some of the younger men carried Ananias out and buried him.

Shortly thereafter, Sapphira, his wife, came to the church, unaware of what had happened to her husband. Perhaps she came to make some final preparations for the Holiday Bazaar, or maybe to bask in the praise she expected for the gift her husband had brought earlier to the church.

When Sapphira arrived, Peter asked her how much they had received for the land they had sold. Sapphira confirmed the amount Ananias had claimed, and Peter instantly knew she was in on the deception. “How is it,” he asked, “that you could conspire together to do such a thing? Listen carefully — the footsteps you hear are those who just returned from burying your husband.” With that, Sapphira fell down dead herself. She was buried alongside her husband in some real estate.

What does this story from the early church say to us as we consider our financial support for the church in the coming year?

Like every minister, I would love to find the words that would inspire faithfulness and joyful giving, that would keep us from holding back in our giving to the church.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira offers a temptation — to use it as a specific warning. After all, doesn’t it seem to suggest that God caused their sudden deaths for holding back?

Not really. The story does not say they were struck down by God. It merely reports, without explanation, that they died. We all know very well that God does not kill people for holding back or being stingy. Yet, the Bible does indicate that while God doesn't cause people to die for their lack of generosity, God may not need to. Sometimes God's judgment works by simply getting out of the way and allowing us to pronounce judgment on ourselves.

Jesus certainly indicated that not being a faithful, cheerful giver carries the threat of death. Didn't he say that those who seek to save their lives by hoarding God's gifts will lose them, and their lives, while those who give their gifts and their lives away will save them?

When we do not respond to God's generosity with generosity of our own — when we hold back — something in us dies, as surely as if our hearts stopped beating.

Here is a person who attends worship, hears God's gracious promises proclaimed, joins in singing hymns praising God's great mercies, and says words of thanksgiving to God as the lover of all creation. Then, when the offering is taken, he or she offers a token, less than what will be spent for brunch that same day, and something in that person dies.

God is not like the armed robber who says, "Your money or your life." Rather, God asks for our money and our lives. These are not separate compartments; they are one and the same. We cannot open our hearts and leave our wallets and checkbooks closed. The reason is that our money and our lives are inextricably bound together. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." God does not ask us to give generously because money should mean nothing to us, but because it means a great deal to us.

When we hold back, when we curl in on ourselves in self-concern, we cut ourselves off from that which confers life, just as a clenched fist cuts off the circulation of blood.

By holding back, Ananias and Sapphira cut themselves off from the community, whose lifeblood is giving. They also cut themselves off from God by denying God access to the part of their lives that reveals their true loyalties and devotions — the part that concerns money. They deprived themselves of life — the full and joyous life that is part of what it means to be a giver. Whenever we hold back from being generous, something in us dies.

The story makes another point: Do not try to deceive God, others, or yourself. You will always be found out, and that too causes a part of you to die.

Ananias and Sapphira were not compelled to give all the proceeds of their land sale to the church. In fact, they were not compelled to give anything. You are not compelled to give anything.

Their mistake was in saying that they had given all the proceeds when they had not. They wanted to appear generous in the eyes of the public, but in the eyes of God, they were liars.

The Gospel of Mark tells the story of Jesus sitting in the temple, watching people put their offerings into the collection plate, making the same point. According to Mark, many rich people put in large amounts, but in reality, it was a very small portion of what they could give. They were doing it to impress others but were actually deceiving God and themselves about their generosity. It was the poor widow who put in two pennies that was the true giver, and she was not trying to impress anyone.

Frequently, we deceive ourselves by saying, “I’m giving all that I can afford.” But that’s not really the truth. What we should be saying is, “I’m giving what’s left over after I’ve taken care of everything else I’ve wanted to do.” If we said that, it would at least be the truth. When we deceive God, ourselves, and others, something in us dies.

One more point this story of Ananias and Sapphira makes is “use it or lose it.” This is 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 that Jesus told makes the same point. Those who were given talents and used them produced more. The one person who buried the talent for fear of losing it, in the end, lost it. Use it or lose it.

That part of us which is never invested in human life — what we try to hold onto most tightly — is what we will lose. God has given us all that we need and has given us more than we need. If we do not use these gifts, then they are lost, and something in us dies as well. On the other hand, the good news is that the more you give, the more you will have.

So in the challenge to faithful giving, there is an implied threat — a self-imposed threat — that if we are not careful, we can cut ourselves off from all that is life-giving, and parts of us die.

On the other hand, God does not so much ask us to respond to a threat, but to a promise. God does not so much threaten us with death but instead extends a promise of life. When we become joyful, generous givers, in a mysterious way, God multiplies our giving. Furthermore, our generous giving always changes us for the better.

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 larger 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 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? They started a miracle. The tide of gifts inspired by her example flowed with increasing strength, and in six years, the 57 pennies had become $250,000, which became the nucleus of even grander things, including the Baptist Temple, Good Samaritan Hospital, and the great Temple University with its thousands of students. All this began with a little girl’s devotion to giving and using what she had.

I cannot conclude any sermon on giving without mentioning the basic Biblical formula on which all giving is based. It is called the CPR of giving: We are to give (C)heerfully, (P)roportionately, and (R)egularly.

There is one more letter of the alphabet that can help us remember the Christian philosophy of giving. It's the letter (T), used three times. We are to give Truthfully. Be honest about your giving. As I mentioned earlier, people sometimes say, "I'm giving all that I can afford," when they really mean, "I'm giving from what's left over after I've taken care of everything else I want for myself."

We are also to give Thoughtfully. Think seriously about what you are going to pledge or give. Think about making regular giving an important part of your life. An example of not giving thoughtfully is simply to give what you gave last year. A thoughtful giver is one who is not afraid to compare what he or she is giving with what is spent on other items in one's budget.

We are also to give Thankfully. A thankful giver is one who never complains about giving. I believe all of us want to become more generous, giving, loving, joyful people. Amen.