Book 29

Sunday November 6, 1994

USE IT OR LOSE IT Acts 4:32-5:11

Mark 12:41-44

When I read this story about Ananias and Sapphira in preparation for this sermon this past week, I remembered a Jack Benny comedy routine which is said to have gotten the longest laugh for a period of silence of any comedy act 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 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 did not 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--in grateful response to God's goodness and in order 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 was mentioned in Luke's book, Acts of the Apostles.

Other members of the congregation, Ananias and Sapphira, also owned some real estate. They sold one property, and Ananias brought an offer-

ing to the church saying that it represented the proceeds from the sale. But Peter, who obviously knew what real estate was worth in Jerusalem in those days, knew that something was wrong. Peter knew that Ananias had held back. Before Ananias had brought the offering to the church, he had taken a cut larger than any real estate broker would command.

So in front of the whole church, Peter accused him: "Ananias, you've held something back. You are lying to us, and what is more to the point, you are lying to God." And right then and there Ananias dropped dead. The people who saw what had happened to Ananias responded 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, not knowing what had happened to her husband. Perhaps she came to make some final preparations for the Holiday Bazaar, but also to bask in some of the praise she felt certain to receive for the gift her husband had earlier brought to the church.

But when Sapphira arrived she was greeted by Peter, who had asked how much they had received for the land they had sold. Sapphira told him the amount, and Peter knew instantly that she was in on the deception with her husband, that she too was holding back. "How is it," he asked, "that you could conspire together to do such a thing? Listen carefully, the footsteps you hear are from those who have just returned from burying your husband." And with that, Sapphira

fell down dead herself. Then she was buried in a most fitting way, along with her husband, in some real estate.

What does this story from the early church have to say to us at this time of year when we are considering what our financial support of the church will be for the coming year?

As is true with every minister, I would like nothing better than to find the words that would keep us from holding back in our giving to the church, just the right words to prompt faithfulness and joyful giving.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira offers quite a temptation. It is the temptation to use the story as a specific warning. After all, doesn't the story

seem to suggest that God caused the sudden death of these two for holding back?

Not really! The story does not say that they were struck down by God. The account 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 although God does not cause people to die for their lack of generosity, it may be because God does not need to. Sometimes God's judgment works on us 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 does contain the threat of death. Didn't he say that those who seek to save their

lives, who hoard God's gifts will lose the gifts and their lives and those who give their gifts and their lives away will save them?

When we do not respond to God's generosity with generosity on our own--that is, if we hold back, then 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, 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 the 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. Those two 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 this, 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 as surely as a clenched fist cuts off the circulation of blood.

By holding back, Ananias and Sapphira cut them-

selves off from the community whose life-blood is giving. And they cut themselves off from God by denying God access to the part of their lives that reveals their true loyalties and devotions; that is the part of their lives 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 a generous giver, something in us dies.

The story makes another point. Do not try to deceive God, or 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 the sale of their land to the church of which they were a part. In fact,

they were not compelled to give anything. You are not compelled to give anything.

The mistake was in their 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 liars.

The Gospel of Mark tells the story of Jesus sitting in the temple and watching people put their offerings into the collection plate, makes 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 is 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 which 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 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 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.

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 which 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.