Sunday, November 2, 2003
USE IT OR LOSE IT (2)
Acts 4:32-5:11; Mark 12:41-44

Every time I hear this story from the book of Acts about Ananias and Sapphira, I think of a classic Jack Benny comedy routine, which is said to have gotten the biggest laugh for a period of silence of any comedy act ever performed. In the incident, Jack Benny, who was well known for being stingy, is stopped one evening by a robber who puts a gun in his back and says, "Your money or your life." After a very long pause, the thief jabs the gun more insistently in Benny's back and asks, "What's taking you so long?" Jack Benny replies, "I'm thinking it over."

Unlike Jack Benny, 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 the little congregation in Jerusalem, in grateful response to God's goodness and in order to meet the needs of the church in its ministry. Most people were very generous in their giving. A man named Barnabas made a huge profit in real estate and gave the entire proceeds to the church. His gift was so noteworthy that it was reported in the church newsletter and eventually mentioned in the book of Acts, written by Luke.

Other members of the congregation, Ananias and Sapphira, also owned some real estate that had greatly appreciated in value. They sold one property, and Ananias brought some money to the church, saying it was all of the proceeds of the sale. But Peter, who obviously knew what real estate was worth in Jerusalem in those days, sensed something was wrong. He knew that Ananias was not telling the truth. Before he brought the offering to the church, Ananias had taken a larger cut than any real estate broker would command.

So in front of the congregation, Peter confronted him: "Ananias, you've held something back. You are lying to us and, more to the point, you are lying to God." And right then and there, Ananias fell down dead. The people in the congregation were shocked and terrified. Who could 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. Why she had not come with her husband, the story does not tell us. Maybe she had been shopping with some of the profits from the real estate sale. Now, however, she was looking forward to receiving some of the praise that was due to her and her husband for their generous gift.

She was met by Peter, who asked her how much money they had received for the land they had sold. Sapphira quickly told him that the amount of money they had received was the same amount her husband had generously given to the church. Peter knew instantly that she was in on the deception. "How could you do such a thing?" he asked. "Why have you conspired with your husband in this lie? Listen carefully, the footsteps you hear are from those who have now returned from burying your husband." And with that, Sapphira fell over dead. Then she was buried in a most fitting way, alongside her husband, in some real estate.

What a strange story to teach at this time of year when you are considering what your financial support of the church will be for the coming year.

As is probably true of many other ministers, I would like nothing better than to find the right words that would keep you from holding back in your giving to the church — the magic words to motivate generous and joyful giving. The story of Ananias and Sapphira offers a different kind of temptation. It is tempting 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 in their giving?

However, nowhere in the account does it say they were struck down by God. The account merely reports, without explanation, that they died. All of you know very well that God does not kill people for holding back or being stingy. You can be thankful for that.

On the other hand, Jesus taught that not being a faithful, cheerful giver does contain the threat of a different kind of death. Didn't he say that those who seek to save their lives, those who hoard God's gifts, will lose those gifts and their lives? He went on to say that those who use and give their gifts generously and joyfully will save them.

The deeper truth is that when you do not respond to God's generosity with your own generosity, something in you begins to die. Picture someone who attends worship, hears God's gracious promises proclaimed, joins in singing hymns praising God's 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 begins to die.

God is not like the armed robber who says, "Your money or your life." Rather, God asks for your money and your life. Those are not separate compartments. They are one and the same. You cannot open your heart and leave your wallet and your checkbook closed. The reason is this — your money and your life are inextricably bound together.

Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." God does not ask you to give generously because money should mean nothing to you, but because it means a great deal to you. When God gets your treasure, God also gets you.

When you hold back, when you curl in on yourself in self-concern, you cut yourself off from that which gives life, as surely as a clenched fist cuts off the circulation of blood.

By holding back, Ananias and Sapphira cut themselves off from the community whose life-blood is giving. And they cut themselves off from God by denying God access to that part of their life that revealed their true loyalties and devotions. They deprived themselves of life — the full and joyous life that is part of what it means to be a giver. Whenever you hold something back from being a generous and joyful giver, something in you 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 the sale of their land 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 from the sale of their real estate but had not done so. 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, which 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 the story, 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 who was the one commended by Jesus.

I am going to take a little detour here to note that this woman was not really a poor widow; she was poor because she was a widow. If you study the plight of women in those days, you will find there was no such thing as a rich widow in that culture. Women were totally dependent on their male relatives for their livelihood. To be a widow meant not only losing someone you may have loved, but more tragically, it also meant that you were losing the one on whom you were totally dependent. Widows were forced to live off the good graces of other male relatives and anyone in the community.

The two little coins in the woman's hand were probably all she had. The truth is — and the extremely poor know this very well — those coins weren't going to change her life. When you've got a penny or two, or even a dollar or two, it's not going to move you from welfare to work. She could be at peace and joyful in knowing she was able to give to the temple treasury because, with the coins or without them, she was still a dependent person. She knew she was ultimately dependent on God.

People who have more money, so that they are not dependent on others, have a different kind of problem. Having money gives you independence and freedom from living like this poor widow. I prefer it that way, and you like it that way, and your family likes it that way. So you will not be putting your entire paycheck in the offering each week or pledging all of your salary for the year ahead, nor will I. I understand that all too well. But I've seen poor, homeless people give the only dollar they have. When you're that low on the economic scale, giving isn't the problem — getting is.

The issue is not how much money or how little money you have in the bank, or what your net worth is, or what your salary is. What's important is your attitude toward it. Is it what you worry about? Is it what you worship? Do you believe that your money is all you are and need from life? If you lost it all tomorrow, would life lose all its purpose and meaning? Does your money lead you to deceive yourself?

People sometimes say, "I'm giving all that I can afford." But that's not always the truth. What some people should be saying is, "I'm giving what's left over after I've taken care of everything else I want to do." If they said that, it would at least be the truth. I admire the honesty of the man in Las Vegas who was asking everyone he met, "Will you give me some money for food?" Finally, a woman said to him, "If I give you money for food, how do I know you won't use it for gambling?" He answered, "Well, ma'am, I've already got money for gambling. What I need now is food."

There's one more point this story of Ananias and Sapphira wants you to remember — use it or lose it. This is a principle that applies to all of life. If you stop using the muscles in your body, they will atrophy, shrink, and become useless. The more regularly you use them, the stronger and more effective they become.

The same is true of your mind. The more you use your 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 were given more. The one who buried his talent and did nothing with it in the end had it taken from him. Use it or lose it.

That part of you which you never invest in human life, what you try to hold onto most tightly, is what you will lose. God has given you all that you need and has given you more than you need.

In the call to become a faithful and joyful giver, there is an implied threat — a self-imposed threat — that if you are not careful, you can cut yourself off from all that is life-giving, and a part of you begins to die.

As your minister, I would never want you to give money for the support of this congregation as a response to any kind of threat. I want you to give joyfully and in response to God's gracious promises. When you become a joyful, generous giver, in a mysterious way, your giving is multiplied. And the most important part is this — giving in that spirit always changes you for the better.

In a few days, you will receive a letter from me asking you to fill out a pledge card for the coming year. First-Plymouth Church continues to be a strong, vital congregation because of your generosity. I know that you want it to continue in that tradition. I'm asking you to prayerfully consider an increase in your giving for the coming year. In my letter to you, I mention once again what I call the CPR of giving — give cheerfully, give proportionately, and give regularly.

There is one more letter in the alphabet that can help you remember what the Bible teaches about your giving. It's the letter "T." I call it the three "T's" of giving. Give "truthfully." Be honest about your giving. As I mentioned earlier, sometimes people will say, "I'm giving all that I can afford," and for some, that is the truth. But for others, it is not. What they really mean is, "I'm giving from what's left over after I've taken care of everything else I want for myself." Give "thoughtfully." Without even thinking about it, some people simply fill in the pledge card with what they are giving this year. That's not giving thoughtfully. Give "thankfully." Amen.