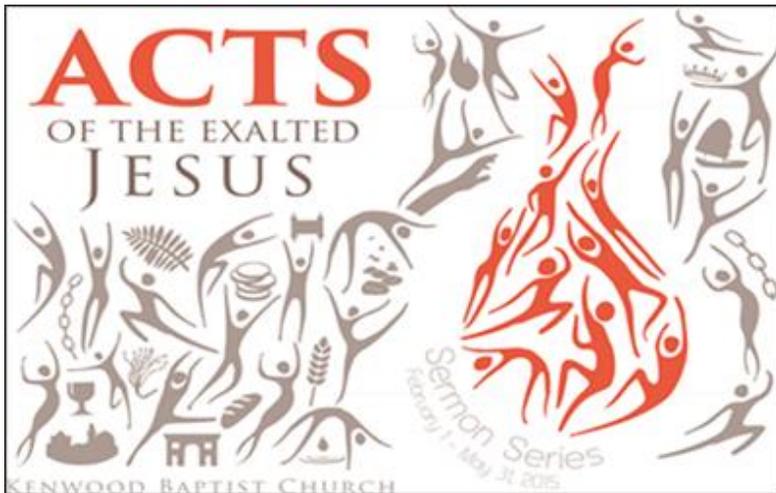


Jesus Creates a Holy Community
Acts of the Exalted Jesus Sermon Series
Acts 4:36-5:17
Kenwood Baptist Church
Pastor David Palmer
February 22, 2015

TEXT: Acts 4:36-5:17

This Sunday we continue in our New Testament series on the Acts of the Exalted Jesus. Last Sunday, we looked at four characteristic behaviors of a new community that Jesus created. They were a people gathered in His name who devoted themselves: to the apostles' teaching; to fellowship; to a shared life of the sacramental breaking of bread together; and to prayer. This



is Jesus' idea of a new community, and it is to be celebrated and savored. It's not something that can be generated by the will or intentions of man.

This morning, we look at the reality that not only does Jesus create a **new** community, but Jesus creates a **holy** community. I am excited to be preaching on this text that isn't often

preached on because I love this text. It is a great example of what we stressed last week, that we have to read God's Word and let God choose the topics and mode of our instruction. You can't pick and choose the places in Scripture, but we gladly submit to His Word. This is important in the text before us because we see both a negative illustration and a positive illustration of the holiness that is to characterize our life together. We will look at these two examples.

Luke sets before us another of his summary statements beginning in acts 4:32. He says:

"All the believers were one in heart and mind."

This in itself is supernatural, for human beings to actually think in the same way, be of the same opinion. Not only is that supernatural, but people did not assert the primacy of their own rights. Community is putting my rights behind the joy of our life together. No one claimed that their possessions were their own, but they shared everything they had. The Scripture teaches that

we are bought with a price, that we are Christ's possession. Luke tells us that with great power the apostles testified to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Jesus Christ is alive and at work in the world around us, and He is at work in the Book of Acts. These are His acts. They testify to His resurrection, His living presence. Then Luke takes us from the summary statement into a very concrete example. We want to look first at the positive example of Joseph and then at the negative example of this couple Ananias and Sapphira, for their conduct reveals the holiness that God desires among us.

Let's look first at the positive example. This is the feel-good portion of the sermon. This is the moment when you say: "I want to be like this man." Luke tells us in Acts 4:34 that God's grace was powerfully at work, and an outcome of the grace of God was giving to those who had need within the community. When you receive the benefactions of God, when you receive His unmerited favor, one of the outcomes in our lives is a spirit of generosity. It's antithetical to the Gospel to receive forgiveness, receive eternal life that none of us deserves, and then to hoard that or keep that to ourselves. The grace of God flowed out among the community, and Luke tells us of some extraordinary acts of generosity and kindness that marked these days. He said:

"For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need."

This is a symbolic gesture of dedicating property or wealth to God. The act is an act of devotion, an act of setting this before God, and the monies were used for kingdom purposes. Luke tells us then the specific actions of a certain Joseph. We are told in Acts 4:36:

"Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet."

Joseph was given the nickname *Barnabash* by the apostles. *Bar* in Aramaic means *son*, and *Nabash*, probably from *Nabu*, means a *son of encouragement or exhortation*. This was the kind of man that when he came around you, you felt encouraged, you felt motivated to go long in faithfulness. We know this Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, forward in Acts by this nickname, *Barnabas*. He sold a field that he owned; he brought the money and he set it at the feet of the apostles. He was faithful in this act. It was voluntary; it wasn't required. It is a voluntary act of devotion to the cause of Christ. The ministry of the Gospel in the world today moves forward by these voluntary acts of devotion to Christ's ministry in the world. Barnabas is faithful in the detail of his giving, and as we look at him in the trajectory of Acts, he appears in many other places. I want us to look at these briefly because it is often the case that we are faithful in details, this plays out on larger and larger stages of our lives. It is a great mistake to imagine that we can be unfaithful in small ways, but when the big moment really comes, then we will be faithful. It doesn't work that way. Jesus says that if you are faithful in little things, then you will

be entrusted with much. We meet Barnabas, faithful in his voluntary giving to God, a dedication to the Lord. We meet him next in Acts 9 after Saul is met by Jesus on the road to Damascus, and he comes and is introduced to the brothers in Jerusalem. Barnabas mediates this new relationship in Acts 9, and later in Acts 11. As the Word of Christ is spreading out beyond the borders of Israel, the church leadership hears of this and they send Barnabas to Antioch. Luke tells us that when Barnabas arrived at this trustworthy man and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to be faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose. It is a characteristic of Barnabas that when he speaks, he is known as a *Son of Encouragement*, or *Son of Exhortation*. He motivates the believers in Antioch to remain faithful with steadfastness in Christ. He stays in this ministry together with Saul, and they returned to the community of Antioch. In Acts 13, we meet Barnabas again, and the church leadership of Antioch prays, and the Lord says in Acts 13:2:

“Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

Barnabas’ faithfulness in little just keeps magnifying in greater and greater degree. He is there as Paul’s traveling companion on the first missionary journey. They go to Cyprus, probably going there because that is where Barnabas was from. On their first missionary trip, the Roman governor of Cyprus becomes a believer, amazing results of ministry. Later in their ministry, the ministry is going so well that not only are Roman governors believing, people from the nations are coming to faith. Barnabas and Paul finally reach this area in the south part near Pamphylia and Lycaonia, and the people there are so impressed with their ministry that they think that Barnabas and Saul are gods walking among them. Sometimes pastors get credit for things that Jesus Christ did, and it’s important for all ministry leaders to give Christ the glory for everything that happens. When these people saw the ministry that was happening through Barnabas and Saul, they said: “The gods have visited us.” They came with offerings to offer to them, and Barnabas led the charge saying in Acts 14:15:

“Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.”

So Barnabas, as we meet him in miniature in Acts 4, plays out as a man of consecrated faithfulness throughout the narrative. In Acts 15, he is simply describe as *our beloved Barnabas*, and I want to challenge you from the example of this man to be faithful to God in those private details of your living. Don’t wait for the moment when you’re on a big public stage. Be faithful to God when He’s the only one who really sees, and let your faithfulness lead out your behavior forward. As you are faithful in little, Jesus promises to entrust you with much.

I remember when I was finishing college and went to live in Washington, DC, part of my internship was an opportunity to meet a number of Christians in public service. As I met with other students, I remember meeting a man who worked for the International Monetary Fund.

As he described the resources that pass through his desk, I thought what a huge responsibility. The more he talked about his faith, dedication to Christ, I could see his ethics were built in private, and so his public life was blameless. He had no secrets, nothing to hide, no ledgers concealed, because his private devotion to Christ permeated his public service and his ministry. We see this powerfully in the example of Barnabas. Just as sometimes you see a person live well, you say: "That is the good way, I will walk in it," and it's motivating and inspiring. Other times God gives us the *via negativa*, the negative example.

The negative example of this text begins in Acts 5. I think that Luke wanted these two incidents to be heard and read together. The chapter divisions of the Bible were not added until the 13th century by Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, and he executed this task while riding on horseback. So, some of the breaks are perhaps not where they should be. Acts 5:1 really flows with Acts 4, so we have this beautiful picture of Joseph's faithfulness, Barnabas, and then Luke introduces us to a negative example. He says there was a man named Ananias. This is an auspicious beginning as Ananias means *the Lord is gracious*, and our hearts rise with delight. His wife also has a name that causes excitement, Sapphira. *Sapphir*, means *lapis lazuli*, or we might say *jewel* in English, like the names *Ruby* or *Esmeralda*. So, we have *the Lord is gracious* and his wife *Jewel*, and we're ready. What's going to happen next? Luke tells us they sold a piece of property, but the narrative turns in Acts 5:2 when Luke tells us tragically:

"With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet."

That is a very critical opening line. This is not an accident; this is not an example of I forgot, nor was it a moment of oversight, my schedule was so busy. No, this was deliberate, intentional, and with his wife's full knowledge. He kept back part of the money for himself. He brought the rest of it and put it at the apostles' feet. We are tempted, when we read this incident, to think: "Well, isn't that nice that they gave 80%?" We were readily inclined to think that was still nice; they gave most of it. Luke doesn't want us to read it that way. This is intentional withholding a gift that's been publicly dedicated to God. There is a profound hypocrisy inside this act. As people are coming and giving their all in a voluntary, joyful response to the grace of God, this couple comes, it appears publicly, as though they were all in for Christ. "We sold our property, too, and here are the proceeds. Put our names on a plaque and note this deed of service to Christ." Those reading the Bible in the original language, note the verb that he uses in Acts 5:2 is unusual. It is the verb for withholding and keeping back. When you look at the usage of this word, the only usage of this term before its occurrence in Acts 5 is in Joshua 7. Joshua 7:1 relates to us the incident that happened in the household of Achan, the son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, after the battle of Jericho. The plunder of the battle, the proceeds of the battle, were devoted exclusively to God as an act of commitment and

wholehearted gratitude for God's granting the victory. As Israel moved forward after this battle, they were engaged at Ai, and to Joshua's horror, Israel was defeated at Ai. He fell on his face before God and said in Joshua 7:7:

"Alas, O Lord GOD, why have You brought this people over the Jordan at all, to give us into the hands of the Amorites, to destroy us?"

The Lord said to Joshua in Joshua 7:11:

"Israel has sinned; they have transgressed My covenant that I commanded them; they have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen and lied and put them among their own belongings."

God tells Joshua to consecrate the people and to bring a sacred assembly. The Lord says in Joshua 7:13:

"You cannot stand before your enemies until you take away the devoted things from among you."

In a sober scene, God's people are assembled by tribes. The tribe of Judah is named. They are assembled by clans, by families, by households, until finally Achan is identified. Joshua says to Achan in Joshua 7:19:

"My son, give glory to the LORD God of Israel and give praise to Him. And tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me."

Achan confesses this heinous sin. It is heinous because it was directly opposed to the will of God; it is heinous because it caused other people to die as a result of his disobedience. Achan confesses in Joshua 7:20-21:

"Truly I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and this is what I did: when I saw among the spoil a beautiful cloak from Shinar, and 200 shekels of silver, and a bar of gold weighing 50 shekels, then I coveted them and took them. And see, they are hidden in the earth inside my tent, with the silver underneath."

We can almost hear the excitement in his voice: "There was this robe, Joshua, it was just so nice, and this hoard of silver coins and a bar of gold, and I wanted them for myself." It is a great danger in the soul to posture ourselves as more devoted to God than we really are; as taking things devoted to God for ourselves. It costs Achan his life, and it costs Ananias and Sapphira theirs. The presence of God is so strong in the community that there is no interview, there is no deliberation. Peter, so filled with the Holy Spirit, looks at Ananias and says in Acts 5:3, and this is strong:

"Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?"

Again, the issue isn't that he gave just 80% and kept some for himself, the issue is the lie, the hypocrisy. The issue is saying publicly, "I'm all for God," but inside living all for self. It's a hidden unfaithfulness that manifests itself in larger and larger degree. Peter challenges him in Acts 5:4:

"Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

Lying to God is costly. Ananias is overwhelmed at this rebuke. Luke doesn't tell us if he has a heart attack, if he has a stroke, or if it's divine judgment carried out immediately. He does tell us that he just expired; he breathes his last, and he died. We are tempted in this world to think our sin is not a big deal. We are tempted to think this is okay. We tolerate unfaithfulness in small ways, and this narrative is to highlight for us that this is to be a holy community, belonging to God, dedicated to God.

Well, Jewel comes in unaware three hours later, the husband-wife team. Peter asks her in a straightforward way in Acts 5:8a:

"Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

She answers in Acts 5:8b:

"Yes, that is the price."

You can imagine Peter's heartbreak at realizing that they had agreed to gather to lie in the community, and Peter says in Acts 5:9:

"How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord?"

Sapphira, like her husband, perishes, and it is no understatement from Luke to tell us in Luke 5:11:

"Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events."

This is the same word used earlier for *awe*. It is awesome that God is so against hypocrisy, that He so against a lie. Luke tells us that this had the initial response of being a kind of anti-growth strategy. In Luke 5:13, we read:

"No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people."

Can you imagine that on the church website? "Come to Kenwood, and if you're a hypocrite and have lied to God, then you'll be struck dead." But, it's a holy community, because actually the obverse is true. When ministries are built on hypocrisy and lying, there is great catastrophe that follows, and the name of Christ is discredited. Lying and deception are an anti-growth strategy, but holiness has this profound effect. People were in awe of the presence of God among the early Christians, and Luke tells us that people highly regarded them because they claimed to

speaking the truth and lived in a relationship to the God of truth. The outcome and the flow of the Gospel forward is greater and greater. Luke tells us in Acts 5:14:

“Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.”

Crowds gathered from the towns around Jerusalem bringing the sick and those tormented by evil spirits and they were healed.

God desires faithfulness in small ways, because what Jesus creates is a holy community. I cannot imagine that the early Christians had an all-night celebration of prayer and praise at the death of Ananias and Sapphira, but they knew that God was holy, and deep down we actually want God to be holy. We actually want God to be against hypocrisy. There are two great objections that non-Christians give against Christianity. The first is some variation of the problem of evil, and we'll talk about that on a Sunday to come. If you really ask that question in truth, the only thing you can be is a Christian, because we have a God, the only God, who actually did something about the great problem of evil. The second objection to Christian faith is hypocrisy and perceived hypocrisy, that Christians say one thing and do another. One of the conclusions we can make from this text, by way of application, is that God is more against hypocrisy than anyone. We have a God who is against those who play false with Him. He desires truth as Psalm 51:6 says:

“Surely You desire truth in the inner parts.”

God rejects with the hypocrite, but He rewards those who seek Him. Hebrews 11:6 says:

“Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.”

Jesus creates a holy community. We are to not pretend to be something that we are not. I'm not asking you to sell your property this morning and divest yourself of all your possessions, but I am asking you to walk faithfully to where you are with Christ. If God moves you to do that, praise God! We have had some extraordinary gifts in our church in our history; we have had extraordinary commitments of service to Christ.

Let me apply this to us in two more ways:

Number one: *God is against the hypocrite.*

Number two: *We should conduct ourselves as a holy people.* Paul says in Titus 2:9-10:

“Slaves are to be submissive to their own masters in everything; they are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior.”

Let your life, your private life, your devotion to God, be of such consistency that people will say things of you and me, Lord willing, but they'll give us nicknames like: “Here comes *Son of Encouragement*; here comes *Mr. Encouragement*; here comes *Miss Faithful to Christ*.” That is what we want to hear, not: “Here comes *Mr. Contradiction*, *Mr. Two-face*, *Mr. Hypocrite*.” Paul says in Titus 2:10 that they are to be “*not pilfering but showing all good faith*.” So conduct ourselves in a way that brings honor to Jesus Christ.

Number three: *We should take seriously, by the grace of God, that Christian community is a holy community, a place where God dwells.* There is no need for an inquisition in Christian community. There's no need for a human tribunal, because it is the place where God's own Spirit dwells. If there are places in your life where you have taken a step and postured yourself to be something you're not, or you've buckled to the pressures of this world to bend the ledgers of your life in your favor, or you've sought to take something back for yourself that you've given to God, repent and ask for His forgiveness. If you've wronged someone or wronged the community, ask for forgiveness.

This is a holy place. We need the great summary statements of Acts 2. The church grew. Jesus creates a new community. Hallelujah, amen! Three thousand people responded; five thousand people responded. We need those passages, but don't we also need Acts 5? God is a God of truth and holiness, and His people should be marked by this. Underneath the grace of God, let us be a people wholly belonging to God.

Amen.