



## "GROWING IS ACCEPTABLE"

A Sermon by

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Scripture Lesson: Acts 4:32 - 5:11

From the pictures that are given us in the book of Acts, the earliest days of the Church must have really been something. It almost sounds like "Paradise Regained." For one brief shining moment, "the law of the jungle" that had characterized most of human history gave way to an experience of community where a large number of diverse human beings lived together in harmony and mutual support. In the most radical sense, they shared life together. As the book of Acts puts it: "they had all things in common," which included not only their thoughts and their emotions but even their economic resources. In fact, it is specified that those in the Church who had more than they needed did not hesitate to make this surplus available through the apostles to those who were in need. Obviously, their experience with the risen Christ had brought about a radical transformation in their lives. They had come to feel so secure in the universe and so compassionate and sensitive to other human beings that such mutuality was the natural overflow. There

was nothing mandatory or compulsive about this generosity. The spirit of Jesus had so worked in these lives that self-centered individuals were transformed into self-sacrificing participants in a loving community, and that is a miracle indeed.

However, lest this picture lose all touch with reality, the writer of Acts goes on to point out that not everyone in the church was at this high point of spiritual maturity. He illustrates this fact by contrasting the action of a certain man and a couple in the fellowship. The man is named Barnabas, and he is to play a significant role in the future of Christianity. He must have been a man of some means, for when he realized one day that needs existed in the community, he went out and sold a piece of property and laid the full proceeds at the feet of the apostles for them to distribute according to the need. This may well have been the first time such a deed of radical trust and generosity was done, and it made a deep impression on the young community. One couple in particular, a husband and wife named Annanias and Sapphira, were moved by Barnabas' act; in fact, so much so that they decided to go and do the same thing. However, when they set out to perform the transaction, it was not as simple as they had supposed. Certain factors within themselves rose up to resist such radical action. Most of us do not fully realize "all that is within us" — what Elizabeth O'Conner calls "our many selves." And often times it takes a moment of stress to make us aware of these realities in our unconscious. I am guessing this is what happened to Annanias and Sapphira. Their generous, heroic selves had been inspired by Barnabas and wanted "to go and do likewise," but they did not represent the totality of "the parliament of personhood." There were also fearful and critical and distrustful selves within them who began to oppose such a move. The fearful selves, for example, may have pointed to the future and said: "Who will take care of you if you give away what you have laid up for a rainy day? It is all well and good to talk about a Father in heaven who will provide for you. I feel more comfortable with money in the bank." Or perhaps the critical selves began to raise questions about the needy in the church and whether or not they were deserving. "Maybe they are in a jam because they were lazy or irresponsible. Why should I sacrifice to pay for someone else's folly?" an inner voice may have whispered. Then again, a dis-

trustful self may have cast a shadow of suspicion on the apostles and how they were administering the funds. "How do you know they are not playing favorites or lining their own pockets?" it asked.

All of this is conjecture, of course, but it is obvious that something happened to this couple between the first impulse to emulate the example of Barnabas and the act of selling their property and making the proceeds available to the church. A conflict of some sort broke out within them, and the way they proceeded to handle it was tragic indeed. If they had followed the path of openness and said honestly to the church: "Look, we've found out things about ourselves we never even realized. What Barnabas did really inspired us, but when we tried to follow his example, all kinds of things flushed up and got in the way. We find we are not able to act so generously, but we would like to. Will you help us?" Had that happened, I am convinced the whole episode would have turned out differently and positively. But Annanias and Sapphira did not do that. They chose rather to hide their conflict and try to resolve things by deception. When they sold their property, they paid off their fearful, critical and distrustful selves by storing a part of it away and then brought the rest to the church under the guise that it was a gift just like Barnabas'. In other words, they claimed to be at a place in their spiritual development where they really were not, and what Jesus said would happen to "a house divided against itself" happened to them — everything collapsed around their heads. It is a testimony to the intensity of the fellowship of the group that this deception was immediately detected. When honest sharing has been the order of the day, a bold-faced lie stands out like a shadow in a well-lighted place. And when Simon Peter confronted Annanias with the fact that the truth was really apparent, the shock was so great that he keeled over dead. It is important to realize that the issue here was hypocrisy and not compulsory communism. Peter makes it clear that Annanias did not have to sell the property or give all the proceeds to the church. He still had full control at both of these points. His sin was not greed but deception, and when the same thing happened to his wife Sapphira, we are told that "great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things."

It is a sobering episode indeed, and I think it has something very important to teach us about the right and the wrong way to deal with imperfection. The great tragedy here is that this couple did not realize that growth is acceptable in our kind of world; that because God is everlasting Mercy and Patience, you do not have to be perfect to be accepted. As I have already intimated, if Annanias and Sapphira had just gone to church and honestly acknowledged their true condition, the whole thing would have been different. If they had just said: "Here is where we would like to be — with Barnabas' kind of trust and generosity. But we find we are not yet there. Lo and behold, there are many parts of ourselves that are afraid and critical and distrustful. We wish we were way beyond this point but we are not. All we can do now is give part of the proceeds. Would you help us grow toward what we would like to become?" Had this happened, I have every confidence that the church would have embraced them affectionately and accepted the challenge to help them. This is exactly how the God of the Bible does His work. He has not chosen to create instantaneously or bring about perfection all at once. Process is His pattern — first the seed, then the blade, then flower; first the infant, then the child, then the adult. It follows from all this that growing is the important thing. God does not confront us at some point and say: "Are you perfect?" What He wants to know is: "Are you growing?" And the pattern of such growth involves three things: an ideal toward which to aspire, an honesty as to where one actually is and the point from which one must grow, and the willingness to receive help in moving from one point to the other. When a person is in this kind of process, that is what pleases God, for this is what makes for growth.

And this is precisely what is so wrong with hypocrisy and play-acting. I used to wonder why this particular sin seemed to upset Jesus so profoundly, but studying Annanias and Sapphira has opened my eyes. Hypocrisy is more than just deception of others; it is a denial of the way we were meant to grow under God. If I steadfastly ignore my true condition, and spend all my energies trying to appear that I am something I am not, I have cut myself off from the very forces that would enable me to grow and improve. The thing that got Jesus about the hypocritical Pharisees was not that they were not perfect, but that they were failing

to grow by the way they were handling their imperfection. If Annanias and Sapphira had only realized that growing and not perfection is the key with God, they could have responded differently and moved forward instead of destroying themselves. But that is their tragedy — they did not realize that God is a Grower, not a Perfectionist.

This is a lesson that needs to be learned at every level of life by all of us. Think of many bad situations that have become worse because we have responded to imperfection by hypocrisy rather than honesty and the commitment to grow. This is one of the obvious lessons to me out of the Watergate tragedy. I honestly believe that if at the very beginning, Richard Nixon had acknowledged that the break-in was a mistake and did not represent the way his administration wanted to be and had asked for help in becoming different, there would have been conflict, but the American people would have responded positively and we could have taken a stride forward in our national maturity. However, it was handled the way Annanias and Sapphira attempted to handle their imperfection, and it came to the tragic consequence that always results from denying and covering up rather than acknowledging and determining to grow.

This principle has relevance to every facet of life, but let me close by applying it to the area of stewardship and where we are just now in the life of the church. As you well know, there are many Barnabases who have helped this church become what she is across the years of her ministry. I have been very moved during my tenure here to see just how important this institution is to many people. I have no doubt that if a real crisis arose, there are several members of this congregation who would do exactly what Barnabas did; that is, they would go and sell their property and make it all available that the life and welfare of this church could be preserved. There have been many whose generosity and commitment is just as admirable as the example of Barnabas. However, the truth of the matter is that in Broadway, just as in the early Church, not everyone is at this point of spiritual maturity. There are lots of people who may look at this kind of generosity and admire it greatly, but when they are perfectly honest, they simply cannot bring themselves to do the same thing with their resources. A survey of



the giving patterns of the last year indicate that some 490 of our church families — almost a third — gave absolutely nothing at all to support the work of the church, and another 25% gave less than \$100. That means that some 53% of the members of the church are doing almost nothing with their money to keep this institution alive. Now, as in the case with Annanias and Sapphira, there may be many reasons for this. It may be that their fearful selves that are uncertain about the future, or their critical selves that do not like the way the money is being spend, or their distrustful selves that are not sure about the administration. More likely, however, is the kind of infantile selfishness that thinks only of taking from life and satisfying self rather than putting something back in and helping to carry the load. I do not think this attitude represents all that such persons are capable of. Just as Annanias and Sapphira, conflicted as they were, were still able to be inspired by an ideal of Barnabas, so I think people today can be stirred to more responsible stewardship.

For example, when explained properly, I think the principle of tithing makes good sense to most people. You have heard me say before that the practice was born in the dawn of the agricultural era. When people stopped being nomads and became settled cultivators of the land, it soon became apparent that part of each year's harvest must be saved for seed. If everything grown this year was eaten up, there would be nothing left to plant and thus the process would collapse. Thus, the tithe, or 10% of what had been raised, was collected and kept as a down payment on next year's harvest.

Most of us no longer live in an agricultural setting, but the "tithe principle" is as true of life as we know it as it was down on the farm. What I mean is, if you are not putting something back into the creative processes that support you, those systems will run dry. If you choose to be merely "a taker" in an urban community and do nothing to support those institutions that both make and keep life human, then do not be surprised if that community is not finally engulfed with inhumanity. Ten percent of what comes in is not too much to plow back into these forces that are part of the answer and not part of the problem. And I believe that when the matter is put this way, it will im-

press people positively the way Barnabas' action impressed Annanias and Sapphira.

However, when such a one who has been giving little or nothing at all, begins to figure what 10% of his or her income would be, it may seem overwhelming. All kinds of internal conflict may erupt and right then is the crucial moment. Instead of doing what Annanias and Sapphira did, let me encourage you to remember one truth: *with God, growing is acceptable*. Instead of giving up the whole thing or resorting to deception, why don't you acknowledge what you would like to become, admit where you are, and then to start growing step by step? This means you might decide to increase by one or two per cent what you give back to Life in light of what Life has given to you. Now, admittedly, this is not perfect, but remember, God is a Grower, not a Perfectionist. He has chosen for reasons all His own not to create perfection instantaneously, which means He does have mercy and patience — provided one thing — that we are trying, that we are attempting to grow. The question He puts to us is not: "Are you there?" but rather "Are you moving?"

For years that verse in the Sermon on the Mount: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as my Father in heaven is perfect," used to haunt me until I studied Greek and found that the imperative and the future tense are exactly the same. Thus, that verse could be translated: "Ye shall be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect." Now obviously, there is a big difference between perfection understood as a demand being made on us and perfection understood as a promise of what God wants to make of us. The latter I think, is the heart of the Gospel, which is why the willingness to grow is so important. I do not have to be perfect before God will love me, but through His love for me, He wants to make me perfect. The question then is, will I let Him grow me? If I will, there is no end to His patience and mercy and grace. But if I refuse to let this happen, by not acknowledging where I am or my need to grow, not even God can save me.

I repeat: His question to us is not "Are you there?" but "Are you moving?" It applies to all of life, but especially this Sunday, in relation to this pledge card, what about it? Are you willing to grow, maybe even just one percent? That is the important thing — not are you there, but are you moving?

Well . . . . . ?