

McCabe United Methodist Church

The Book of Acts: A Spirit-Fueled Adventure!

“If God Is Behind It...”

Sermon on selected verses of Acts 4:32-6:7 (5/28 & 5/29/16)

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Holy God, you give us words, you guide our thoughts, and you fill our hearts. May these words I speak be pleasing to your ears, may our thoughts be formed in your image, and may our hearts be ever tuned to you; in Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Knowing that good, mature Christians should have hearts that are open to sharing with others, about seven years ago, I started praying that God would help me become more generous with my space.

See, I really *love* my space: my personal space, for sure, but also the space of my home. My home has always been my haven and, for years, I had a very hard time handling it when other people showed-up to hang around my home for more than, say, an evening.

Like when my family – who I love *dearly* – would come visit me. I loved having them there because they helped fill the house with joy and love, but, of course, they also filled it with their *stuff*. I have plenty of my own stuff to wade through at home, so when my *family's* stuff would get added to the house for days at a time, I would become more than a little anxious.

After many, many family visits – and much anxiety, with some snippiness toward my dear ones – I decided it was time for an attitude adjustment. But I knew that would take some serious prayer. If you're anything like me, you know it takes prayer and sometimes a small miracle in order to bring about a needed change of attitude!

So I prayed God would help me be more generous with my space: to be more welcoming when other people were in it...to be more welcoming of other people *and* of their stuff.

Well, sometimes you should be careful what you pray for. Because, about a month after I started praying that God would help me be more generous with my space, a couple in my church asked if I'd consider having a temporary roommate.

The husband in this couple helped run an area non-profit and they were bringing in a young, single woman to serve as an intern for them. They were having a hard time finding housing for her at a reasonable cost... and, after hunting around for a while, they thought about their pastor who happened to be single (which I was at the time): single and living in a 3-bedroom home.

My gut reaction was to say, “No way!” It was one thing for God to help me be less anxious about my space when my *family* was there...it was quite another to have a roommate actually *living* with me in my home!

But, I knew God was working on me, so I said, “Yes”...and the roommate thing worked out just fine. Plus, I knew it was helping someone out who was working for a good cause.

I couldn't help but think about this “generosity of space” thing as I thought through this week's Scripture reading...because, though it is about more than just this, today's reading is certainly about what it means for Christians to be open-hearted toward one another – when it comes to space, when it comes to resources, and, when it comes to *life* in general.

As you heard today's Scripture read, you may have found yourself thinking, “There is a *lot* going on here...” So let me recap what we heard in those selected verses from Acts chapters 4, 5, and 6.

First of all, recall that, in last week's reading, Peter and John got arrested for preaching and teaching about Jesus – and for healing someone in Jesus' name. They were put in jail and then put on trial before a group of Jewish religious leaders.

The religious leaders warned Peter and John *not* to keep preaching and teaching about Jesus. But, when the two apostles were dismissed from the religious leaders, they immediately went and told the other members of the church what had happened. And, instead of everyone deciding to

back down, they prayed that God would make them brave enough to keep teaching others about Jesus – even though they knew doing so might cause them to be thrown in jail...or worse.

After that prayer for bravery, comes today's reading which begins with a reminder that, when the church began 2,000 years ago, Jesus' followers shared their possessions and shared their other resources of money and food so no one was in need.

Please keep that bit of information at the front of your mind because it's vitally important to remember that the message of the early church was not only about believing in Jesus, it was *also* about living in a way that blessed others.

So, the early Christians shared their resources...some folks even sold their houses and property, turning over the proceeds to the lead apostles so the money could be distributed throughout the church, as needed. Sounds pretty beautiful and inspiring, doesn't it?

But...as is the case with all organizations inhabited by human beings, even the early church was not as “beautiful and inspiring as it strove to be. Enter: Barnabas, Ananias, and Sapphira.

The storyteller makes sure to introduce us to Barnabas – or “Joseph” – and to tell us he was one of those who sold some property and gave the proceeds to be distributed among the Lord's followers. So, Barnabas is a “good guy” in the book of Acts. Ananias and Sapphira, however? Not so much.

Ananias and Sapphira were a married couple and were part of the early church. Like Barnabas, they, too, sold a piece of property with the intent of giving the proceeds to the apostles to be shared among the other believers. However, this couple decided to hold back a portion of the proceeds, keeping some of it for themselves.

And this was not how things were supposed to work among the Lord's followers: if you decided to do something generous to benefit the larger

group, you were supposed to go “all in”...you were not supposed to hold something back for your own comfort, or to maintain your sense of social status.

When Ananias brought the portion of their property sale to the apostles, for some holy and mysterious reason, Peter knew it wasn't the entire amount. So Peter said to Ananias, “Why has Satan made you keep back some of the money from the sale of the property?”

At that moment, surely Ananias was a bit freaked-out. Like, How in the world did Peter know??? And then Peter twisted the knife when he added this follow-up question: “Why have you lied to the Holy Spirit?”

When they chose to hold back a portion of the proceeds from their property sale, Ananias and Sapphira probably had a sense that they had somehow lied to the *apostles*. I have a feeling, however, they had *not* thought their little dishonesty was dishonesty against the Holy Spirit – the very Spirit of God that was fueling the growth of the church.

Well, you might think Peter calling Ananias to account for his dishonesty would have been enough accountability...but, it wasn't. Because, after Peter called him to account, Ananias dropped dead. And, then, just three hours later, Sapphira showed-up – not realizing what had happened to her husband – and the same thing happened to her:

Peter asked Sapphira about the money from the sale of their property, asking her to tell him if what Ananias had brought a few hours before was the actual amount of the sale. Sapphira said it was...Peter then asked her why they agreed to test the Holy Spirit...and *she* dropped dead.

That's some pretty harsh accountability for what many of us might deem a simple white lie!

If nothing else, the sudden deaths of Ananias and Sapphira serve as an illustration of just how important it was for members of the early church to be sincere and generous with one another.

At the same time this mess was happening with Ananias and Sapphira, the Jewish religious leaders were getting increasingly concerned: concerned that the message of Jesus continued to spread. So they arrested the apostles and put them in jail. That wasn't in line with God's desires for the apostles, however, so an angel busted them out of jail and the apostles all went right back to teaching others about Jesus.

This was not good news to the religious leaders...so they rounded up the apostles and brought them before the religious council...*again*.

“We told you plainly not to teach in the name of Jesus,” the high priest said to the apostles. “But look what you've done! You have been teaching all over Jerusalem.”

One of the members of the Jewish religious council, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, ordered the apostles to leave the room for a bit. When they were gone, he said something extremely powerful to the rest of the council: he said, “I advise you to stay away from these men. Leave them alone. If what they are planning is something of their own doing, “it will fail. But if God is behind it, you cannot stop it anyway, unless you want to fight against God.” *“If what they are planning is something of their own doing, it will fail. But if God is behind it, you cannot stop it anyway, unless you want to fight against God.”*

As I've said the last two weeks of this Acts sermon series, the entire book of Acts is about how the message of Jesus spread beyond Jerusalem after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven.

The book of Acts is driven by the message that the mercy and power of Jesus Christ is for everyone – regardless of location, race, or social status. And this drive to spread the message of Jesus was fueled by the Holy Spirit.

Those of us who have been paying careful attention to Acts so far understand the wisdom in Gamaliel's words to the other Jewish religious leaders: we who have been paying attention already *know* that God is in what the apostles are doing. In fact, we already know from the story of Ananias and Sapphira that fighting against God can be extremely harmful...to say the last!

“If what they are planning is something of their own doing, it will fail. But if God is behind it, you cannot stop it anyway, unless you want to fight against God.”

These words were a warning to anyone who would try to get in the way of what God was doing through the apostles: and if you kept trying to stop them, watch out!

The religious leaders decided to heed Gamaliel's warning and to let the apostles go free... again... but not before having them beaten with a whip, and not before telling them – *again* – to stop teaching about Jesus. Yet, just like we heard last week, the apostles kept right on teaching about Jesus, bringing more and more new followers into the church.

See, people were drawn not only to the message of Jesus' healing and saving power, they were also inspired by the *life* the members of the early church were living – that life of sharing resources, of caring for one another...a life where social status didn't seem to matter.

Life *within* the church was beautifully different than life *outside* the church – and people wanted to come in to be part of it. That was true of the church 2,000 years ago and it should remain true today.

People should look at us Christians *today* and think, “I want to be part of whatever is inspiring them!” People should see in us a kind of generosity and hospitality that makes them think, “*That*. I want to be part of *that*.”

This past Tuesday evening, about a dozen members of the Open Door Community Center Board gathered at 5:30pm for our monthly meeting. Serving on this Board are people who are actively engaged in our four Bismarck-Mandan area United Methodist churches.

There were at least five McCabe folks present at this meeting and, when 6:10pm hit, just about as many phone alarms went off around the table, reminding us it was time to stop and pray our 6:10 prayer. Thankfully, the non-McCabe members of the Open Door Board were gracious enough to hit “pause” on the meeting so we McCabers could pray our 6:10 prayer together. Then, after we prayed our 6:10 Prayer Challenge prayer, all of us

around the table launched into a conversation about the prayer challenges a couple of the other churches are currently doing.

Mandan United Methodist Church is doing an 8:26 Prayer Challenge, based on Romans 8, verse 26...and Legacy United Methodist here in Bismarck is doing a 7:14 Prayer Challenge, based on 2 Chronicles 7, verse 14.

“6:10” was chosen as the time for our McCabe Prayer Challenge because Matthew chapter 6, verse 10, is the line of the Lord's Prayer that says, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

See, in this life, we have the incredible opportunity to work with God to help *this* world – *this* “kingdom” – look something like God's heavenly kingdom. In fact, we pray to make that happen every time we say the Lord's Prayer: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...”

Our One Thing for June is all about praying for our part of this earthly kingdom. You may have noticed the description in the bulletin announcements...

Typically, our One Thing each month is some sort of collection – food for the food pantry, summer items for a non-profit that works with at-risk youth – or it's a request for monetary donations, like our current One Thing: donations to help purchase Military BibleSticks for deployed members of our armed forces.

Well, in June, we're doing something a bit different. We're going to cover Bismarck-Mandan with our prayers...and we're going to do that by encouraging *you* to pray as you go for walks, runs, bike rides, or even car and motorcycle rides this month.

We want you to pray about whatever you see, whatever you notice as you walk: pray for the people, pray for the schools, pray for community safety personnel you encounter, pray for entire neighborhoods. Pray about what you *notice*. Pray that God's Spirit will bless our communities with mercy where mercy is needed...with power where power is needed. And pray that God will *be in* and behind the lives and work of our community's people.

Because, when God is in and behind something, it's beautiful...people are drawn to it...and there is no stopping it.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, send your Holy Spirit to breakthrough into my heart and into McCabe United Methodist Church. Lead us to bold, new ways of sharing your love with one another, in our neighborhood, in Bismarck-Mandan, and beyond. May we look to you always as we build your heavenly kingdom on earth. We pray this in the powerful name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.