

“Handle with Care: Trust”

Matthew 6:25-34; Ephesians 4:1-6, 11-16; Acts 4:32—5:11 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might grow in trust
and trustworthiness. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

Well, that's a weird story. Seriously, there are so many red flags here, I'm not sure how this story got included in the Bible in the first place. As I have mentioned before, we will be looking at some scriptures as good examples during this series on spiritual maturity, and some as cautionary tales. You can guess which one today's is. But the red flags aren't just coming from the obvious “bad guys” in this story, are they?

Our topic today is trust. In order for any congregation to flourish, trust must be present. But trust in what? Trust in whom? How does trust relate to spiritual maturity? The two scripture passages we read this morning point to more than one kind of trust. There is trust in God, and there is trust in people – that is, trust in the church, trust in the church's leaders, trust in one another. Reading these two passages together, we can also see that trust in God and trust in other people are related. The verses from chapter four tell us that people were selling property and giving the proceeds to the church so that everyone's needs could be taken of. Needs-based redistribution of wealth, we might call that. But who decides what qualifies as “need”? How did those folks decide if they could trust that their needs would be

met? And what was the context that made Ananias and Sapphira decide that they preferred to hedge their bets and keep some back, just in case their needs weren't adequately met? Was this an example of them not trusting God to take care of them? Or was this a case of them not trusting that Peter and the other church leaders would take care of them?

There is so much we don't know about this story. The way the verses in chapter four describe it, it seems as though there was a pretty strong community expectation that people who had property would liquidate it and add it to the communal kitty. But when Peter is scolding Ananias for lying about how much they got from the sale of their land, he implies that this was not a requirement at all. They didn't have to sell it, and they could do whatever they wanted with the proceeds. This puts a new spin on what was described in chapter four, making it seem more like people were just being moved to share abundantly, not that anyone was pressuring them to sell and donate. We just don't know what the situation really was.

But one thing I think we do know: if your friend told you they were thinking about joining a church that encouraged people to sell their houses and donate the proceeds to the church as part of becoming members, you would do everything you could to talk them out of it. Have we just grown less faithful over the centuries? Do we have no trust that God will take care of us? Or is something else going on here?

Part of what is complicated in this story is the conflation between trusting in God and trusting in the church. Maybe that felt different in those early days, so soon

after the arrival of the Holy Spirit Jesus had promised, coming on the rush of the wind, but these days, people are as likely to say the church is not trustworthy as to say it is, even if they do, in fact, believe in God. And there is Peter, talking as if lying to him was the same thing as lying to God. One might even argue that his insinuation that Ananias had no obligation to donate the proceeds of their sale to the church was manipulative, when in fact, the previous chapter had established that this was the common practice. It might not be a rule, but if everyone else is doing it, eyebrows would definitely be raised if someone didn't.

And then, of course, there is the whole getting-struck-down-dead thing. The writer is very careful here, let us notice, not to give us the impression that Peter condemned Ananias or Sapphira to death. Nothing Peter did or said implied he made that happen. But happen it did, according to the story, and “great fear seized” everyone who heard about it. Again, if you had a friend who was getting to know a new church, and they told you stories that made you think the people there did what the leaders said out of fear – even if they didn't involved people being struck dead, you would, I am sure, try to convince your friend to back away from further involvement in that congregation.

These red flags seems fairly obvious from the outside, don't they? And yet, the church has a long history of letting leaders manipulate people by conflating trust in them with trust in God and pretending that any offense or push-back against the leaders is a sin against God. In a few moments, we will sing an old hymn, “Trust and

Obey,” which for some of us may have sentimental meaning because of when we first sang it. But I would also ask you to pay attention to those words carefully, because you can also see how they contribute to a culture where asking questions is forbidden and standing up for yourself is considered impolite. There is a long tradition in church of asking people to give all they have. And while that can be a path to faithfulness, the church also has a long history of abusing that biblical call to self-sacrifice.

So what was going on with Ananias and Sapphira? Had they been in a situation before where their needs were disregarded? Were they used to a lifestyle that was more comfortable than the basic needs the early Christian community would provide? Did they have special circumstances that would mean they needed some money laid by, that they were afraid to talk to Peter about ahead of time? We are given the impression that the issue is not that they kept some of the money, but that they lied about it. So on the one hand, they proved themselves not trustworthy. But doesn't their underhandedness also reveal that, for whatever reason, they didn't entirely trust the set-up of this community?

The truth is that these days, so many centuries later, the vast majority of folks who will walk through our doors for the first time are more likely to not fully trust church than they are to assume a church is trustworthy. Even if they haven't been part of a congregation where leaders broke trust – whether in misconduct cases involving money or sex or other abuses of power, or just by repeated smaller betrayals

of confidence, acts of insincerity, and neglect – people have heard plenty of stories about church scandals. And some of them are daring to walk back into a church building after being directly targeted by an abusive leader.

So how do we cultivate trust within a congregation? How do we grow to become trustworthy? How do we communicate to newcomers that this is a place that places high value on trust and trustworthiness? Is that even possible, or is trust simply something can only develop over time?

Even though that story from Acts is short on detail and full of red flags, there are a couple things we can learn from it. First of all, as some of the best new conventional wisdom reminds us: clear is kind. There may be a practice that works well for most of the people in a congregation, something that becomes the way things usually work, such that a newcomer could reasonably assume that's just how things are done here, whether it works for them or not. It might be so natural for those of us already here that it doesn't even occur to us to clarify that it doesn't have to be that way for everyone. But if we want people to trust that they can truly be their whole selves here, we need to keep an eye on how common practice assumes the power of expectation, and make sure that we clarify that other approaches are also welcome. For instance, a congregation full of people who arrive in cars isn't necessarily very attuned to the need for a good place to lock up a bicycle, but if someone were to arrive on one, I would hope we would find appropriate accommodations quickly and graciously. And who knows what doors such welcome could open?

Unfortunately, many needs are not as easily spotted as a bicycle. So how do we communicate a level of trustworthiness solid enough that people will dare to ask for what they need? Think about the people you trust. Consider the people you trusted easily and the people you're still not sure you trust, even after knowing them for many years. What are the characteristics that lead to trust? Last week, someone mentioned empathy as a possible new fruit of the spirit. The capacity to see someone for who they are, without putting your own experiences or assumptions on them, is something that helps people trust us. Kindness was on the list in Galatians. And there's a lot that stands behind kindness, isn't there? People notice not just how we treat them, but how we treat others. If we are observed talking one way to some people and another way to others, people won't know if they can trust us, because they'll see how our respect is conditional.

There are many other virtues that contribute to being a trustworthy person and a trustworthy community. But as we close for now, I want to touch back on the idea of trust in God. Part of what makes someone trustworthy is that we see them put others before themselves, or at least make sure others are taken care of. Often that level of generosity is rooted in a deep trust in God. This might cost me something, but it's okay because I know God's got me. I can give folks the benefit of the doubt or risk being misunderstood, because I trust in God's grace to fill in the gaps. There is a certain humility that goes along with being trustworthy. It's when we're able to judge situations fairly because we've learned that our perspective is never the only one

that matters. It's when we're secure enough in our own faith to have both the courage and compassion to help someone see that the way out of their problem is the hard thing not the easy thing. We don't trust someone because we fear what they could do to us; we trust them precisely because when we're around them, we aren't afraid.

Trust is a vital ingredient for a healthy congregation. It operates kind of like a web that holds everything else together. I call it a web because it extends in so many different directions: people trusting the pastor, the pastor trusting people, people trusting congregational leaders, the pastor trusting congregational leaders, congregational leaders trusting the pastor and the other people, people trusting one another. A few strands of that web may occasionally be damaged, and when they are, careful attention should be given to repairing them before too much pressure is put on the other strands and the whole thing starts to fall apart. Without trust the rest of it doesn't work. When trust is strong, we may barely even notice how it's holding everything together. But someone coming in for the first time, whether with low trust in churches or with a more neutral approach, can sense whether that web is strong or not. They can tell if we trust one another, and they will decide quickly – whether they realize it or not – if they can trust us. May the Holy Spirit equip us to grow in trust and trustworthiness, that we might continue to build up the body of Christ in love. Hallelujah and Amen.