

The False Self

Jeremiah 17:5-10

- ⁵ Thus says the LORD:
Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals
and make mere flesh their strength,
whose hearts turn away from the LORD.
- ⁶ They shall be like a shrub in the desert,
and shall not see when relief comes.
They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,
in an uninhabited salt land.
- ⁷ Blessed are those who trust in the LORD,
whose trust is the LORD.
- ⁸ They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.
It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;
in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.
- ⁹ The heart is devious above all else;
it is perverse—
who can understand it?
- ¹⁰ I the LORD test the mind
and search the heart,
to give to all according to their ways,
according to the fruit of their doings.

Acts 5:1-11

³²Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.

³³With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.

³⁵They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had

need.³⁶ There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”).³⁷ He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

¹But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property;² with his wife’s knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles’ feet.³ “Ananias,” Peter asked, “why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to

keep back part of the proceeds of the land?”⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!”⁵ Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it.⁶ The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

⁷After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.⁸ Peter said to her, “Tell me

whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price.” And she said, “Yes, that was the price.”⁹ Then Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.”¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.¹¹ And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

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Some of you are likely confused. Ananias and Sapphira sold some property and gave most of the money to the church. Peter argued with them over whether they gave all the proceeds. To you it seems that Peter was greedy.

Others see here a story of how Ananias and Sapphira lied. Most of us would agree that everyone lies at some point. It seems a forgivable matter. Why were they not challenged to repent and then forgiven?

Others of you see only that Ananias and Sapphira died because of their connection to the church. And there is some part of you that says, “I knew that church was bad for a person”.

What is this story about, and what does God intend to tell us all through it?

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There is in this story a contradiction from the very start. The name “Ananias” means “Yahweh is gracious” and “Sapphira” means “beautiful”.

Jesus had just given his all for his followers and the early church was moved by his gift to them. A beautiful spirit of generosity filled the church so that people shared what they had so that everyone else had what they needed.

Barnabas was a specific example. He sold some property and gave the proceeds to the apostles to distribute to the poor.

Ananias and Sapphira also sold a piece of property but they only pretended to give all the proceeds to Peter. Unlike Barnabas, they held onto some of the money.

Ananias and Sapphira were spiritually dishonest.

One of the scary parts of this story is that it echoes what we hear elsewhere in Scripture, how we love our neighbor (or fail at that) is a reflection of how we love God.

In the Old Testament, failure to give the Temple a tithe of one's income was seen as *stealing* from God.

Jesus taught “inasmuch as you do mercy to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you do it to

me”. Mercy to others was mercy to Jesus.

And when the risen Lord confronted Saul for persecuting the Christians, Jesus said “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

Scripture does not give us an escape clause for sinning only against one another. Rather it ups the ante and says that our actions toward one another are an expression of our heart before God. Who we are to others reveals who we are before God.

We might draw a moral from the story and say “don't lie to one

another because it is also lying to God”.

Truthfulness is important, but the issue goes further than honesty. The prophet Jeremiah shows us two ways of being in the world: relying on our human resources and abilities or trusting in God.

Ananias and Sapphira were not showing trust in God, but trust in their resources. They withheld. But why? Why *say* that they gave all the proceeds of the sale? It seems that what others thought of them was important to them.

Perhaps Ananias and Sapphira lied **BECAUSE** they wanted others to think

- that they were more generous than what they were and
- that they were more selfless than what they were
- and more connected to the community of faith than what they were.

We might judge Ananias and Sapphira for their actions, but we would miss the point of this story for the early Christian community.

Ananias and Sapphira reveal that Christianity is only a fantasy if

we do not practice what we preach. As Jeremiah said, God knows our hearts and minds and that's what counts. Faith is not about a public persona – it is about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who has broken the old world so that God might be about recreation in us and among us.

The problem for Ananias and Sapphira and for us is that we grow up learning old world priorities.

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In the womb, all our needs are met, but the moment we are born, we crave air, water, food, warmth and comfort. Early on, children learn that having those things is the key to happiness, contentment, security and well-being.

In this early endeavor, parents are the providers. At some point, most parents have an intuitive sense of the importance of our bond with children. At times, at some desperate times, we withhold our love and affection in order to influence their behavior. “Eat your creamed

spinach or I'll not play with you after supper!"

The result is a deep, perhaps unconscious sense that they/we! are not loveable *in themselves*. Rather it is how we *perform* that matters.

This is not just about what happens at home. Children learn it in their friendship groups. As children grow, the popular child is, at first, the one who *has* neat stuff: a swimming pool, a motorized car, a pool table. From that we have a sense that our value comes from what we have.

Later, it is the child who can do things well gets the affection: the baseball player, the good student, the polite child. There we learn that our value is found in what we do.

Eventually, we develop the mistaken notion that what others think of us determines whether we have value or not.

Over time, we develop the mistaken belief that our life is really about
what we do,
what we have, and
what others think of us.

As we spoke on Wednesday night, none of these things are inherently bad. In fact, they are good. We cannot be part of any community be it family, school or workplace if we have no concern for these things.

THE PROBLEM is that in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, having, doing and other's opinions can guide our lives. We mistakenly think that who we are and any future we have is wholly dependent upon us.

For that reason we call these ideals *our false self*. Sadly, life focused on these things fails to

understand and embrace the love in which we were created, redeemed and now sustained.

It is also false because, in them, we base our permanent worth on what is ultimately fleeting.

In one of the *Raiders of the Lost ark* movies, one of the bad guys tries to possess the holy grail. In touching it, he dies. It seems that beyond the caution to respect what is holy, there is also the message that in grasping for what we think gives life, death may be the result.

Doing is equally precarious. Recently, 8 US District Attorneys were fired apparently for political reasons. All people whether Republican or Democrat are troubled by that. While it always happens with the party in power changes, this time, the powers that be said they were dismissed for poor performance. We're learning that that was not true. In spite of their performance they were dismissed. Putting all of our energies into what we do is risky because we cannot secure love, joy and peace by our doing.

And the opinion of others? There is likely no more beloved coach

than Joe Paterno and yet several years ago, during what was a blip in Penn State football performance, analysts and fans alike were saying he had lost his coaching edge and that he should retire. If the public's opinion can shift on Joe Paterno, what hope do we have of lasting love, joy and peace through what others think of us?

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The false self cannot provide what we are searching for and pursuing the priorities of the false self makes us into the kind of people we do not want to be.

When we are motivated by our false self, we interact with people so that they will provide what we want. People become objects for our manipulation to give us what we want, and when they resist us, we become angry – at times, violent.

This past week I was at the bookstore when the woman in front of me was in search of several books. Frustrated because her book was not in stock, she said “Well, if you don’t have it in stock, I’ll just buy it on-line and they’ll deliver it to my door.”

“We may have the other books you asked about?” the clerk said with patience.

“I’ll just buy them on-line as well” the woman huffed.

When operating out of concern for what we have, do, or people’s opinions, “no” is unacceptable.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of living according to our false self is that it causes to LIVE IN FEAR.

When our identity is centered in what we DO – we must perform.

And should we fail to perform our self-esteem falters.

I have a sneaking suspicion that Michael Jordan was loved for his performance and that it was that fear of loss of love that motivated his intense competitive spirit. It seemed that after each poor performance, Jordan felt the need to compensate and so he drove him to be spectacular.

When our identity is centered in what we HAVE – we are fearful that we might lose it and so we guard and protect it. We become possessive. We resent it when the church asks for a pledge or a

social service agency calls for a donation.

When our identity is centered in what OTHERS THINK OF US, we mistakenly believe that another's opinion determines our value. It is not the 99 affirming voices, but the 1 critical person that you remember.

I confess that for a long time in ministry, I worried about what people thought of my sermons. When I had a bad sermon, I would be down for days.

The problem is that it may be a good sermon but not meeting you

at your point of need. It may be a good sermon, but people are weary and do not respond visibly.

Or...it may be that its not a good sermon. A newspaper columnist said that he begin each week knowing that one of his five columns will be the worst of the five.

Only in recent years have I developed the practice that before I enter the sanctuary, I ask: is it faithful? Have I done my best with the time that I have had? And here is the key question for me: can the Spirit

work through it? those questions have freed me from the fear of public opinion.

I once read a delightful book on the art of negotiation. The subtitle and underlying thesis of the book was “Care, but not T-H-A-T much”.

It is likely that you answer to one of these areas more than another, or with some people more than another. It’s a natural part of growing up with old world priorities.

The problem is that what worked for us as children cannot work

for us as adults. Instead, grasping for those things makes our world less stable than it already is.

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Someone said that every unhappiness that we have is related to the false self: what we have, what we do, and what others think of us.

The verdict on that has not yet become clear. What is certain is that much of our efforts to change and grow spiritually fail because of our bondage to our false self.

How much energy do we put into our possessions, into our performance, into our public persona and at what cost?

Someone described living according to our false self as putting icing on a mud cake. No matter how much icing we add, the mud keeps seeping through.

Little by little, we can discover the places where we live by our false “in me I trust” self.

And more and more, we can trust in God who in Jesus Christ loves us, forgives us, recreates us so

that we may know lasting love,
joy and peace.

Next week, we will focus on
abandoning our false self.