

The Good-ole Days

sermon digest

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Acts 4:32-5:11

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Perhaps it would have been appropriate for Grace Chorale to have sung “Give Me That Old Time Religion” today, and we could use this time of worship to massage our memories of days when we were much younger and the world’s problems were blissfully hiding behind our ignorance. Since our church was born in less than perfect circumstances, perhaps our memory of beginnings is not so distorted. If you are like me, you prefer to just move on. However, the word is nostalgia, “homesickness,” a deep longing for the past. Anyone who has been around awhile has either encountered or emulated the condition. Thomas Wolfe addressed it in his novel *You Can’t Go Home Again*. I especially like the quote attributed to Will Rogers, “Things ain’t what they used to be, and never were.”

As a child, listening to stories of the years before my birth, I was convinced that I had missed the boat. According to my elders, the good old days BL (before Larry) were just like that song I learned growing up in Texas, “Oh, give me a home where the Buffalo roam, Where the Deer and the Antelope play; Where seldom is heard a discouraging word, And the sky is not cloudy all day.”

Hey! I grew up in Texas. Believe me, except in the Herman Park Zoo, I never saw deer, buffalo, or antelope playing around Houston, and cloudy skies and thunderstorms were quite common as in tropical storm Bill.

I suspect and prefer to believe that something like nostalgia is behind some of the stories in Acts. The post-Easter stories of the first generation of Christians portray a honeymoon epoch in the life of the church.

Like marriages, churches tend to move through stages of development that begin with a honeymoon. The honeymoon is variously defined as the beginning stage, usually the traditional vacation from normal duties like work when we are so infatuated with our beloved and the blissful state of marriage that we look right past his/her flaws and faults that naturally exist in every real person. But the honeymoon has to end. Sooner for some than for others, when the irritating human condition becomes apparent, we are prone to think that our perfect lover has fallen. In fact, the honeymoon is over. What has changed is not our beloved spouse so much as our ability to see and address the imperfections in our mate and in our marriage. Then we suddenly encountered the real world of marriage. The adjustments in relationship that continue throughout any marriage are authentic; but some of us are known to hide in nostalgia, longing for the good-ole days, days when we were so blinded by love that we chose to overlook our spouse’s grating, irritating humanness, and we are prone to complain, “things ain’t what they used to be, and never were.”

The first church of Jerusalem described by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles was growing by leaps and bounds and learning new ways to be a family of faith, just like most of the new congregations that I have experienced. Luke records memories and oral histories of the way things were, undoubtedly filtered through the wishful thinking associated with nostalgia.

I have been involved in writing the fiftieth anniversary history of two churches, always working with a committee of older members who lived the history which we were trying to preserve. In both instances, I encountered tendencies to forget or to ignore the failures and magnify the accomplishments of the early congregation. I hold the opinion that the same tendency affected some of the stories in Acts, only the story today seems to be exaggerated in two directions.

We have a tendency to split the story as did the scribe who inserted a chapter division between the generosity of Barnabas and the dishonesty of Ananias and Sapphira. It is one story, not two. It has an up side and a down side. The up side describes a church of perfect harmony, “of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions,” and “everything they owned was held in common.” The word translated “common” is *koina* the root of *koinonia*, congregational community. Furthermore, “There was not a needy person among them.”

Luke describes the ideal that all of us wish but none of us has experienced: a church of such ideal *koinonia* (communion) that no one claimed personal ownership of material possessions, where all personal property was viewed as community property, and no one in the congregation had need. Don’t misunderstand my critical interpretation here. I am not saying that such ideal behavior has never

been known in the church, just that the perfect harmony of the total congregation is probably exaggerated.

A few years ago a woman and her children appeared one Sunday morning in worship, desperately seeking help from strangers in a church where one should expect a caring community. She was living in the local facility for abused women, hiding from an angry, violent husband. I saw the church rally to her side, helping to find a job, an apartment, and furnishings. When I reported to the deacons that she needed legal aid for a court appearance, a man whose spouse had been abused in a previous marriage stepped forward like Barnabas with money to retain an attorney. I wish that I could report a perfect rescue where everyone lived happily ever after; but we live in the real world, where some courts have a reputation for supporting spouse abuse even when children are the common victims.

In spite of the human flaws in every church I have ever known, experiences of faithfulness, compassion, generosity, and kindness have always provided ballast for the gossip, pettiness, and selfishness found in the body—just like most of us have learned to love our spouse, warts and all. If I may borrow from Winston Churchill's statement on democracy, the church is the worst form of community in the world except for the alternatives.

As a student of church history, I have retained my Protestant identity, not because I find the Protestant church movement to be pure perfection but because Protestantism recognizes the church as a flawed, human community always in need of reformation. As a student of Roman Catholic Christianity, I have found much to affirm and admire in the Catholic tradition; but I believe that the Achilles Hill in Roman ecclesiology (theology of the church) is the strained belief that the Church is without sin. We do better to face the real world of imperfection in ourselves and others than to mythologize and idealize a world that does not and has never existed.

Thus enters Ananias and Sapphira. It is not a different story. It is scene two of the same act in the drama of the early church. But like most pastors, myself included, we prefer to duck the very difficult scene made by a cheating, lying couple named Ananias and Sapphira. The Revised Common Lectionary follows suit, including the story of perfect harmony in Acts 4 but leaving off the scene of two dishonest members.

Like marriages, churches must grow to face the reality of sinful imperfection in the body. The down side of Luke's story is as exaggerated and out of touch with the norm, and I might add, out of touch with the gospel, as the overstatement of congregational perfection. After the blessed, beautiful example of Barnabas, the ugly picture of the dishonest couple appears. The story is ugly both in reference to the behavior of Ananias and Sapphira and to the condemnation of Peter and the supposed act of retribution from God, striking down to death Ananias and Sapphira without any chance for repentance. Here I find myself in agreement with the pagan philosopher Porphyry. Peter, recorded in the Gospels as one who three times denied knowing Jesus at his crucifixion, lacks the purity of performance as a disciple to condemn Ananias and Sapphira.

Now I recognize the possibility that Luke's commentary, "great fear seized the whole church," might improve the financial standing of the church; but I have not found people in the churches I have known to be fearful of withholding money from the church. In fact, if everybody who ever lied or cheated in the church were immediately struck dead, our congregations would be decimated along with their pastors.

It is also a commonly known fact that the big issue creating dissonance in most congregations revolves around money. William Willimon tells of the complaint from one of his church officers, "Why are we always talking about money in the church? . . . I wish we could get beyond this and talk about the spiritual things that are really important for the church" (*Interpretation, Acts*, p. 52). Willimon goes on to the conclusion that Karl Marx was at least partly right about economic determinism running the world. In fact, every spiritual concern of the church has a material aspect. We cannot love God and Mammon at the same time, neither can we isolate the two in neat little isolated compartments of our lives. We always tend to put our treasure where our heart is.

While the legitimate importance of material Christian stewardship is reflected in the story, the element of grace and forgiveness so important in the gospel of Christ seems to be missing.

I believe that an opposite tendency is at work in the story of Ananias and Sapphira from the story of

the perfect harmony of the church. Just as we are prone to get lost in the good-ole days of past perfection that never were, human memory is prone to demonize the opponents of past encounter as subhuman monsters undeserving of love or grace. Some of us were around when the "Battle of the Peace Bell" came to Oak Ridge. A group of private donors arranged with a bell maker in Japan to cast a traditional peace bell commemorating the war with Japan with a commitment to lasting peace to be displayed prominently on city property. A strong opposition arose from members of the City Council and veterans of the War who did not want any symbol of peace to be parked on public property that implies an apology to Japan for the atomic bomb. It appeared in the public debate that World War II was still raging in our little town.

Consider the gospel: we have witnessed in this past week the strange act of forgiveness by families of the victims toward the young man who shot dead nine people in the AME Zion Church in Charleston, SC. In the real world of this real church, we can ill afford to idealize our holiness before God or claim the right to withhold God's grace of forgiveness toward the dysfunctional people of our world and in our churches, so help us God.