

Last week we began a series on “New Beginnings” by opening up the New Testament book of Acts. The book of Acts is the first book in the New Testament after the four gospels which tells us stories about Jesus and his life on earth. Acts then picks up the story from what happens next.

But as we talked about last week, Acts is so much more than simply a history lesson of the early church. Acts was written about 40-70 years after the death of Jesus and the people were worried. The people were worried because Jesus had not returned in their lifetime.

The early Christians expected Jesus to return in their lifetime and with no Jesus return they were worried that God had abandoned them. The plan was not working out like they had planned and so they needed a different angle to interpret the world and interpret what God was up to.

And that is where the New Testament book of Acts comes in. Acts is written as a way of telling stories from the past of how God was leading them. Acts is written as a way of inviting people into being a part of God’s unfolding plan. But these stories of God’s faithfulness are not just the people who lived 50 or so years after Jesus. Acts is also written to invite you and me into God’s unfolding drama.

Acts is an invitation into a new beginning. And that is where you may be. I know it is where we are as a church. As I recognized last week, 2014 was a difficult year for the church but now you are moving forward with a new beginning. A time to look forward and a time to allow God to make you into something new.

But like the church, you may also be at this same kind of place in your own life as well. Maybe you too have been facing some difficult times and you are ready to turn the page and move forward with a new beginning. Or maybe God is yearning for you to begin afresh but you are holding on to something from your past.

Something inside of you may be holding you back from the new beginning that you are being called into by God. If you are in a time of new beginning or maybe are having a hard time at starting afresh, the book of Acts and the story we are about to read may be just what you need to hear.

Let's set the stage for what we are about to read. The book of Acts begins by describing the process of voting on a new apostle to replace Judas, then we read the story of the Holy Spirit descending at Pentecost, and then we hear the story of Peter and John being thrown into prison for healing someone. Now we get to this reading which describes what happens next. We are going to split this reading up into 2 parts.

Read Acts 4:32-37

Probably not the best Scripture if you are looking to defend capitalism against socialism. This is actually the second time in the book of Acts that a group of Jesus followers are described as selling their possessions and having all things in common and there not being a needy person among them. They trusted so much in God and in each other that they were willing to put their money where their mouth was.

We then read about a man named Barnabas who puts his field up for sale and brings all of the money and lays it at the apostle's feet. This is total commitment to the cause. This is what it means to be all in. Barnabas was willing to take the chance and make a total commitment. Barnabas was willing to sell off his old stuff, his prized possessions, his real estate holdings, and trust God to create something new through him. He trusted in God more than he trusted in his investments and money.

But not everyone was at the same place as Barnabas. We are now going to read a story of a couple that could not let go of what they valued. Two bits of information I share before we read this passage. This is the first crisis that the early church encounters together. This is also the first time that the word “church” is used in the book of Acts.

Read Acts 5:1-11

The result of their holding back money might be a little severe. OK, it is very severe. Ananias and Sapphira hold back a portion of the proceeds from the sale of land they own and the result of their actions is death. So why do they hold back? The reason they hold back and the reason we value our possessions is because we feel that we need that same sense of security that comes from our possessions.

We have a very hard time putting complete trust in God to take care of what we really need. We have a very hard time of letting go of material possessions and having complete trust that God will take care of what we really need. We feel more confident in holding some stuff back from God rather than trusting God with all of our material possessions. We trust our own financial portfolio and our own piggy bank more than we trust in God to provide what we need.

What would this look like today if we lived out Acts 4:32-37? What if we each made a commitment to one another in which each of us would sell all of our vehicles and homes and land and stuff and broke open our piggy banks and then shared with everyone so that there was not a needy person among us? What would that be like? I’m not sure any of us would be in support of this. But this is what this community of Jesus followers did in the book of Acts.

Not surprisingly, there are some folks who are not willing to make that kind of commitment. Ananias and Sapphira sell a piece of land and don't report all of their income. They bring only a portion of the income from the sale of their property. Ananias and Sapphira hold something back and then lie about it.

They can't make that financial commitment because they do not really trust that God will take care of them. They hold back and place greater trust in themselves and their investments rather than God. And what happens to this couple that holds back some of their financial investments from God? They die.

As we move forward as a congregation there may be some hesitancy to invest financially in the people of this church. We may want to hold back. And I get that. But as we are faced with decisions about how much to invest in God's work and how much to invest in the people of this congregation, I invite us to remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira. Ananias and Sapphira could not make a total commitment. And this lack of commitment led to their death.

I can understand why some folks may want to hold back in their commitment to God's work through this church. It's a risky investment for sure. But, nonetheless, total commitment and being all in is an invitation extended to each of us. For me and my family that is why we strive to give 10% of our income to Allison Creek Presbyterian Church. We are not fully there. I believe that we are at about 7% at this time. Our children do a better job at tithing than their parents.

You may be at a point in your life when you are being invited to some sort of new beginning. But like Ananias and Sapphira, you may be holding onto something from your past as well. Maybe you are holding on to a fading memory that is stopping you from new relationships.

Maybe you are holding onto guilt from some mistakes in the past that is preventing you from moving forward in your life. Maybe you are holding onto some financial investments that God is inviting you to let go of and allow it to be used in a way that serves God.

Most of us have a hard time of letting things go. But we are invited to look at these thoughts and possessions from a different angle. Are these possessions and thoughts holding us back from a new beginning that God is inviting us into? Is God inviting you to let go of some of your financial security in order to do God's work now here on earth?

Only you know the answers to those questions. But as you look at your life and financial portfolio we are invited to ask ourselves if our hording is causing us to die a slow death. AMEN.

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-Given: January 18, 2015 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)