

## *Buckets and Watering Cans*

**Leviticus 19: 9-10** When you harvest your land's produce, you must not harvest all the way to the edge of your field; and don't gather up every remaining bit of your harvest. Also do not pick your vineyard clean or gather up all the grapes that have fallen there.

**Matthew 6:19-21** "Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don't eat them and where thieves don't break in and steal them.

**Acts 4:32-35** The community of believers was one in heart and mind. None of them would say, "This is mine!" about any of their possessions, but held everything in common. The apostles continued to bear powerful witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and an abundance of grace was at work among them all. There were no needy persons among them. Those who owned properties or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds from the sales, <sup>35</sup> and place them in the care and under the authority of the apostles. Then it was distributed to anyone who was in need.

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You may have noticed that we've read the same three passages for three Sundays, now. As things have worked out, we've looked at one passage each week.

Two weeks ago we explored the passage in Leviticus chapter nineteen. There we learned that the Israelites were to leave the edges of their fields un-harvested so there was food for the poor and the stranger. This led us to consider what to do with our harvest – our paycheck, social security, or investments. And so, we were reminded that we are to share – no matter how large or small our field is – no matter how good or bad the year is.

Last week, the text from Matthew led us to talk about collecting treasure for ourselves according to cultural pressures – how we get distracted by shiny gods that glitter and gleam -- about other idols that can get in the way. We become addicted to our idols, repeatedly thinking that if we just upgrade our electronics, redecorate the house, get that promotion at work, that then, at last, we'll find contentment and meaning in our life. So we continue to worship our idols and wonder why we are always hungry for more and are never satisfied.

Both weeks we celebrated how far this congregation has come in the last four years. We aren't the same people we were four years ago. We have more children, more classes, more attendance in worship than we've had in ages. And if we keep our eyes on the vision before us, then this congregation has a bright future.

Once upon a time, a chicken said to a pig, "Let's do breakfast!" The pig replied, "That's easy enough for you to say. All that breakfast requires of you is a donation. For me, it's a commitment!" Today, we'll consider the issues raised by the third passage of scripture that we've been reading each week. It deals with donation and commitment

We're told at the end of the fourth chapter of Acts, that in the early church in Jerusalem, there was great unity in heart and mind. It was one for all and all for one. They were so unified that those who owned property would sell their property and bring the proceeds to the apostles who would distribute the money to meet the needs of the poor. This level of commitment scares us. Nobody likes this passage. It challenges us beyond anything we want to think about. Sell our property? Hold everything in common? Sounds like communism to us!

Most of us are willing to make a donation to the church, but we haven't moved very far toward making a commitment. Confronted by this text, we need to be humble about our gifts and tithes for the work of the church today. But there's more. Here's what follows this passage:

<sup>CEB</sup> **Acts 5:1** However, a man named Ananias, along with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property. <sup>2</sup> With his wife's knowledge, he withheld some of the proceeds from the sale. He brought the rest and placed it in the care and under the authority of the apostles.

<sup>3</sup> Peter asked, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has influenced you to lie to the Holy Spirit by withholding some of the proceeds from the sale of your land? <sup>4</sup> Wasn't that property yours to keep? After you sold it, wasn't the money yours to do with whatever you wanted? What made you think of such a thing? You haven't lied to other people but to God!"

<sup>5</sup> When Ananias heard these words, he dropped dead. Everyone who heard this conversation was terrified. <sup>6</sup> Some young men stood up, wrapped up his body, carried him out, and buried him.

<sup>7</sup> About three hours later, his wife entered, but she didn't know what had happened to her husband.

<sup>8</sup> Peter asked her, "Tell me, did you and your husband receive this price for the field?" She responded, "Yes, that's the amount."

<sup>9</sup> He replied, "How could you scheme with each other to challenge the Lord's Spirit? Look! The feet of those who buried your husband are at the door. They will carry you out too." <sup>10</sup> At that very moment, she dropped dead at his feet. When the young men entered and found her dead, they carried her out and buried her with her husband.

I heard on this passage many years ago. When the minister finished reading this text, he looked up and said, "I don't know about you, but that scares the hell out of me!"

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is so upsetting that it isn't on the lectionary, the list of scheduled readings, of any of the major Christian churches. That might be a good thing in some ways. It **is** a story that can easily be misunderstood. It can then be misused as an emotional club to beat up people and scare them into giving more to the church.

We can hear this as a story that says, "If you don't give enough to the church, God's likely to smite you." Give or die. Give generously, because you never know when you might die – and God would be mad at you for being stingy. But that's not what it says and that's not what it means.

Ananias had seen how a man named Joseph had sold a field and given the money to the church. The apostles gave a nickname to Joseph. They called him Barnabas, which means "one who encourages." Ananias wanted the same kind of respect and recognition, so he and his wife sold a piece of property. They kept part of the proceeds and gave the rest to the church. But apparently they claimed that they were giving everything. Peter accused Ananias, not of being stingy or holding out on what he gave. Peter told him clearly that he could keep as much or as little as he desired. But he had lied about what he had done. He had deceived people into thinking he was more generous than he was. He had tried to buy respect and admiration. And when Peter unmasked him for the liar that he was, he dropped dead. It does not say that God killed Ananias. God didn't smite him. Perhaps the immensity of what he had done in trying to get praise and respect by lying to others and to God caused him to have a stroke. Perhaps he remembered what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. Whenever you give to the poor, don't blow your trumpet as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the street so that they may get praise from people. I assure you, that's the only reward they'll get." Who knows? But the text doesn't say that God struck him down.

Ananias and Sapphira cut themselves off from the church when they violated the relationship by deceiving them. Peter pointed out that they had lied to God. Years ago, in the movie *Love Story*, one of the characters claimed that there was an eleventh commandment – "Thou shall not lie to thyself." That's not an exact quotation, but it gives the meaning. Ananias and Sapphira **had** deceived themselves. They told themselves that saying that they gave all while they held back

some was okay. They told themselves that it wouldn't do any harm. They told themselves that no one would ever know.

It's a story that hits too close to home. It's easy to rationalize and excuse our holding on to money. "I worked hard for this and deserve it. It's all I can do to make ends meet. I'm not really that well off – just look at what so and so has." Here is the raw truth. If your income is on the line between the bottom one-third and the middle one-third of people in the US, you are bound to feel pretty poor. There is a lot that you can't afford and don't have. But your income is in the top ten percent in the whole world. That means two things: One, you are better off than you thought. Two, there are a huge number of people that need your help.

But poverty is not a statistic. Poverty is a person. Poverty is the man who has no place to sleep tonight. Poverty is the woman who wonders how she will feed her children tonight. Poverty is the kid who doesn't have a warm coat for the winter.

You aren't a bucket that God is supposed to fill with blessings. You're a hose through which God's blessings are to flow. We aren't meant to be a dam where God's blessing collect; we're to be channels through which God's blessings flow. We want to think that we are a bucket and we want God to fill our bucket so that everyone will know how much God loves and approves of us. But God wants us to be watering cans. God blesses us so that we may share God's gifts with others. We are the means that God uses to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and heal the sick. Our level of generosity is a clear indicator of how much the Holy Spirit is at work in our heart.

The choice is ours. Will we **go** to church, or will we **be** the church? Will we strive to be buckets and hope for the best? Or, will we flow generously, watering the growth and outreach of this church? Bucket or watering can? Which will you be? Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,

Do not serve God out of fear, but in response to God.

Respond to the steadfast love of God with all the love you can muster.

Respond to the blessings of God by passing them on to others.

Respond to the bounty of creation with generosity and joy.