

“Compare and contrast...” In my generation, at least, and I suspect for many on either side of mine, those words were a part of the essay prompt most often seen in literature classes, history classes, indeed any class in the humanities from middle school through college, not to mention the standardized tests that were so often the key to where we were able to go to college. It was essays prompted by those words that enabled me to score well-enough on the College Board’s ACH or Achievement Tests that I actually began my university career at Rice with Sophomore standing in English and History, an advantage, alas, that I soon lost in the wake of emotional and academic breakdown following my mother’s death.

But regardless of how well any of us may have done with those essay prompts in school, “compare and contrast” is actually a pretty useful analytic tool in any number of fields, scientific as well as humanities. I’m going to use that tool today as a way of approaching the scripture passage I just read. How do we compare and contrast the stories of the primitive Church featuring Barnabas and the husband-wife team of Ananias and Sapphira, respectively? To give you all a little sneak preview, I’m also planning to use this approach in three weeks, with another set of stories in Acts. Between now and then, we’ll hear sermons from Rev. Guantai, next week, and Rev. Saquic, on the 20th. As always, I’m looking forward to hearing from my brother pastors. I’m looking forward to hearing from our sister pastor, too, the almost-Reverend Denise Aanenson, as she’ll be rejoining our preaching roster in July as she wraps up her work at First Baptist, Mountlake Terrace.

But let’s get on with the task at hand. Our fictional exam prompt might read, “compare and contrast the character and actions of Barnabas (as seen in the New Testament book, “The Acts of the Apostles,” and various of Paul’s letters) with the characters and actions of Ananias and Sapphira (as seen in Acts 5:1-11). What lessons do these characters have for Christians in the United States of the early twenty-first century?” Of course, before we can compare and contrast, we have to understand who these three people are and what they did.

This passage is our introduction to Barnabas, who will go on to be a fairly significant figure in the early Church. As with all the first followers of The Way, he is of the lineage of the Children of Israel, specifically a descendant of Jacob’s son Levi. He is also the first named follower of Jesus (remember, they weren’t called “Christians” yet) who was from somewhere besides Galilee or Judea, being a Cypriot. We also learn in this passage that Dr. Luke, for all his learning and erudition as a chronicler of the early Church, probably did not speak Hebrew. As we’ll see, Barnabas was certainly an encourager, but you can’t read that from his name. As J. Bradley Chance writes in his volume on Acts for The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, “‘Bar-’ does mean ‘son,’ but ‘-nabas’ does not mean ‘encouragement.’ Literally, the name means ‘son of Nebo,’ a pagan god, a curious name for the apostles to give to the Levitical Jewish believer. Perhaps, though less likely, ‘-nabas’ could be derived from the Hebrew word (nabi) ‘prophet,’ hence, ‘son of a prophet.’ This latter suggestion certainly makes more sense, but few commentators accept this etymology.” Perhaps Luke’s inaccuracy is one reason why the name fell into disuse. Unlike the man who was at first his junior partner, Paul, or his cousin, Mark, Barnabas isn’t remembered in the naming of little boys. We don’t even find many characters named Barnabas in literature. There’s a very minor Charles Dickens novel called Barnaby Rudge, whose title character is a simpleton, which probably didn’t do the name any good. Many of you may remember that Buddy Ebsen played a TV detective named “Barnaby Jones,” and you

may even be aware of a personal favorite of mine, the conflicted vampire “Barnabas Collins” of the gothic soap opera, “Dark Shadows.” But I digress...

Once we are introduced to Barnabas, Luke goes on to relate an important incident which further helps us understand this man’s sterling character. Barnabas is what we would now call a “major donor.” He sells a piece of land and gives the whole proceeds to the apostles for their work. We understand this in context of how Luke has described the life of the Jerusalem church in the verses just prior to the introduction of Barnabas. I’ll come back to that in just a moment, but first I want to quickly look at other stories Luke tells about Barnabas to round out our understanding of him. In chapter nine, Luke tells the story of the conversion of Saul, a young man who has heretofore been the arch-enemy of the new faith. We remember him by his Romanized name, Paul, and you may remember the story of his conversion. What pertains to our analysis of Barnabas is that when Saul begins to preach the Good News, first in Damascus and then, when his own life is threatened, in Jerusalem, the disciples in Jerusalem, not surprisingly, are afraid of him. “But,” Luke reports, “Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus.” It is only after Barnabas vouches for Saul that the Jerusalem church accepts him as one of their own. Barnabas is clearly someone that the rest of the disciples trust. He must have been a friend of Stephen and many others who suffered because of Saul. But just as Jesus had forgiven those who persecuted him and taught his disciples to forgive, so Barnabas forgives Saul, takes a chance on him, and helps him find community. All Christians owe Barnabas a great debt. Had he not encouraged Saul, we might not have the letters from Paul that make up a significant portion of our New Testament.

Likewise, Barnabas was an encourager of another young man with a somewhat spotty record of faithfulness in the cause of Christ, his nephew, John Mark. This young man accompanied his uncle and Paul on one of their first missionary journeys but left midway to go home to Jerusalem. As Barnabas and Paul prepared to set out again on another round of preaching, John Mark asked for a second chance to go with them. Pugnacious Paul, as I’ve called him before, would have none of it and the partnership of Paul and Barnabas broke up in favor of two new teams: Paul and Silas, and Barnabas with John Mark. Both preaching teams went a long way to spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ across the Roman world. An equally lasting impact of Barnabas’ encouragement of his nephew was that the young man would eventually, tradition tells us, write the oldest of our New Testament Gospels, the Gospel According to Mark. That Gospel, in turn, served as the basis, we believe, for those of Matthew and Luke. Without the encouragement of Barnabas, our New Testament would consist of the Gospel, letters, and Revelation of John, the letters of James, Peter, and Jude, and the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Let’s shift our focus now to the immediate context of this morning’s passage. Beyond the individual stories of Barnabas and the duo of Ananias and Sapphira, Luke wants to make some important points about the state of being of the early Church. First, he says, “the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul.” In The Jewish Annotated New Testament, Gary Gilbert points out that this phrase echoes many verses in Deuteronomy in which heart and soul are, “paired to represent the completeness of one’s obedience to God.” You might think of Jesus’ rendition of the Greatest Commandment, which Luke’s Gospel renders as “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and

with all your mind.” Bradley Chance writes, “It was not uncommon in literature of the Hellenistic period to find the expression ‘one soul,’ an idiomatic way of talking of friendship, joined with ‘holding all things in common.’ Gilbert also points out that communal ownership of things was a widely praised practice of the Qumran community, based on commands in Deuteronomy, as well as being an ideal held up by Hellenistic philosophers such as Aristotle and Cicero. Luke’s words in Acts 4:34, “There was not a needy person among them,” are a close echo of Deuteronomy 15:4. Chance writes, “As with the previous summary, Luke is painting an ideal portrait, recognizable to Gentile readers, of the early community.” Chance quotes the work of one of my former seminary professors, John Polhill: “What [Gentiles] esteemed as an ideal, had become a reality in the young Christian community.” What we have in Acts 4, then, is a picture of the Church as ideal, from the vantage points of both Jews and Gentiles.

Into this perfect society, this Second Eden, comes a serpent, or, rather, two people under the control of *the* serpent: Satan, the adversary. Ananias and Sapphira, as a couple, are the negative example to balance Barnabas, the positive example of a Christian who acts with all his heart and soul. As Luke tells us, they also sell a piece of property but then scheme together to keep back some of the proceeds. Luke uses an interesting word here in the Greek. The verb translated as “kept back” implies embezzlement and is used to denote keeping for oneself that which belongs to another, or which has been entrusted to one temporarily. We may remember the Psalm that teaches, “the earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof.” That’s why we sang “This is My Father’s World” just before we heard this story. It’s also useful to know that this verb is used in the Joshua 7:1 to describe the actions of a man called Achan. He kept for himself some of the captured goods that were to be devoted to Yahweh.

Peter’s accusation of Ananias provides us with more context for Ananias’ sharp dealing. “‘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? 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!’” Peter rightly points out that the proceeds of the land sale belonged to Ananias and Sapphira to dispose of as they pleased. But if, as most scholars interpret the passage, they had joined with Barnabas and others in a vow to remit all the proceeds to the apostles, then they have broken that vow, their promise to God. It is to God, not the apostles that they are bound in this matter. As to Satan’s involvement, let’s remember that it’s been only months since Judas sold out Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Not only is the Adversary known as “the Father of Lies,” but the apostles have had a recent experience of how the forces of evil use economic pressures to accomplish their cause.

The consequences of the lie and of valuing money more highly than God are immediate for both Ananias and Sapphira. Today, common knowledge of how the human body works is far advanced from even a physician of the first century. We understand that, for Ananias, the shock and humiliation of being publicly exposed as a vow-breaker and a cheat could have easily caused a heart attack or stroke, which would have likely been fatal at that time. For Sapphira, the same pertains, plus the additional shock of learning that her husband and co-conspirator was dead. We need not assign these deaths to an intervention on sinners in the hands of an angry God. In our frame of reference, they are the natural consequences of being caught in a lie in a society in which honor was paramount.

I think it's also important for us to remember at this juncture how differently the Biblical writers used the word that is translated "fear" from our usage of that word. The "fear" that "seized the whole church" is not terror. Think of all the times that a messenger from God or that Jesus himself tells people, "Do not be afraid." We would be much more accurate, in today's understanding of words, to say that the church was seized by awe or reverence. The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira were, for those early followers of the Resurrected Christ, further proof that God had power over life and death. They, the faithful, need not fear but were reminded that the God they were called to love without limit was indeed the Creator and Sustainer of Life.

Compare and contrast Barnabas, on the one hand, with Ananias and Sapphira, on the other. All three were Jewish residents of Jerusalem. All three were adherents to the new faith in Jesus as the Christ. All three were land-owners. All three sold land and gave money to the apostles. But, whereas Barnabas gave all his sale proceeds, as he'd promised, Ananias and Sapphira attempted to hide the full amount of their proceeds and give only a portion to the Church. Barnabas went on to a long life, full of service to God and the Church. The "Catholic Encyclopedia" summarizes its entry for Barnabas with these words: "With the exception of St. Paul and certain of the Twelve, Barnabas appears to have been the most esteemed man of the first Christian generation. St. Luke, breaking his habit of reserve, speaks of him with affection, 'for he was a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of Faith.' His title to glory comes not only from his kindness of heart, his personal sanctity, and his missionary labours, but also from his readiness to lay aside his Jewish prejudices, in this anticipating certain of the Twelve; from his large-hearted welcome of the Gentiles, and from his early perception of Paul's worth, to which the Christian Church is indebted, in large part at least, for its great Apostle." Ananias and Sapphira, on the other hand, died in disgrace.

The comparison and contrasts seem clear enough. But what about lessons for today? Why is this old story worth remembering for us? I don't think the real lesson here is about money. This sermon is not a craftily disguised appeal for you all to dip further into your pocketbooks to support this church or any other missions cause. Nor am I necessarily advocating communal living and ownership for Christians, although there are certainly successful examples of that lifestyle to point to throughout history and even in the U.S. But the communitarian experiment of the Jerusalem church failed – Paul spent a great deal of time on his missionary journeys and in his letters fundraising for the impoverished Jerusalem Christians. And Jesus himself recognized the value of any gift given with a whole heart – remember the widow and her mite.

I think that Charles Talbert, author of Reading Acts, the book that Charlie and Pam used with us in a study of Acts a few years ago, has part of the lasting lesson for us. He remarks on the unity enjoyed by that first church, inspired by the Holy Spirit. Talbert suggests that it was a response to the needs of their brothers and sisters which led those like Barnabas to give fully. Ananias and Sapphira, he notes, were driven by self-indulgence. They used their wealth, not to build the community, but for their own desires. For those two, what they wanted was more important than what others needed.

There is also a strong lesson about integrity in this passage, and I am indebted to Bradley Chance and his commentary on Acts for this understanding. Chance writes, “Ananias and Sapphira were people without truth; they acted with neither honesty nor wholeness and consistency of character. They wanted to belong to the renewed people of God, yet they wanted to live like the people of darkness...” He continues, “When we encounter a shocking story like this one, the very experience of the shock should allow us to feel just how crucial words such as “consistency,” “wholeness,” and “truthfulness” are to the Christian community’s character. Initially, rather than side-step the shocking judgment, we should allow it to make its full impact on us and move us to feel just how abhorrent the lack of integrity is to the God we claim to follow.” It seems to me that any lessons upholding integrity are critically needed in our world at the moment.

As I close, let me return our attention to the Psalm with which we began our time of worship. Psalm 32 reminds us that God stands ready to forgive all our transgressions. All we must do is confess them to God. We are, to borrow from Bradley Chance, to have integrity in our dealings with God. It can be hard to remember to do that when our culture is so full of examples of successful people with seemingly no integrity at all. But, as this nation’s great poet, Longfellow, translated from the German poet of two centuries before, Friedrich von Logau: “Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small; Though with patience he stands waiting, with exactness grinds he all.” We must not despair when we see evildoers go scot-free, but instead we must wait in anticipation of the day when our awesome God sets all things to rights. Until that day, our calling is to live in integrity, to always love, and to look in our hearts for God. Thanks be to God. Amen.