

# “Take the Plunge”

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Acts 4:32-5:11 Wall Street United & St. John's United combined Virtual Church

*I've just finished my 2<sup>nd</sup> year Residency for my Doctorate of Ministry program. It was supposed to take place in Chicago, but because of CoVid, both this year and last year were on Zoom – which is both wonderful and amazing, but also its own special kind of hell. The courses were very rich and very intense – I felt like my brain was exploding. The first class was called 'Preaching as Performance'. They had us doing all sorts of preaching exercises to stretch us. For one sermon we had to choose between the text that was just read – (actually it didn't have the nice bit at the beginning about the church, just the part about Ananias and Sapphira) — and a text from the book of Hosea about taking a wife in whoredom. We were given the assignment at 5pm at the end of class and had to preach on one of the texts the next morning. So my sermon this morning is in part what I preached for this class.*

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Last August we went camping with my cousin and his family. Rowan who was 6 really wanted to go swimming. But the water was a little chilly, there was slippery rock on the shoreline, and then the water got deep. You really just had to dive in. It was not a place you could wade and splash around in and get used to the feel of things.

Rowan was wearing a life-jacket and would be fully buoyant and the water was full of kids—his siblings and cousins having a blast. It looked so good and he wanted to be part of it. But Rowan couldn't bring himself to get in the water. He stood on the edge in a tortured state for more than half an hour! It was painful to watch. Being the compassionate and patient person that I am, I wanted to pick the kid up and throw him into the lake and so put him out of his misery (and me out of mine!) ... but his parents were there and exercising a clearly more loving and tender parenting style than my own, so I resisted temptation.

Have you ever been there? Desperately wanting to take the leap and fly, but at the same time deathly afraid and clinging to your current location or situation with the familiar ground beneath your feet?

I bet you have. This is where Ananias and Sapphira were. They were standing on the edge of an abundant life of following Jesus, a life in full community with the Church, but they held back from going all in.

This story takes place at the beginning of the life of the early church, at a time when the followers of Jesus were living together in unity and holding everything together in common so that no one was in need. It was the honeymoon of the church: young, full of life, full of vision, full of the Holy Spirit. They had no fear; they were not full of the self. They weren't worried about the budget, or the property or hiring new staff. They weren't worried about their own health or financial security or whether they wanted to hang out with 'those people'. Instead, they were so full of faith in Jesus that they could see and dare

to meet the cares and concerns of needy world. It's amazing how much more time and energy we have for other people and for a broken world when we are not so filled with our own concerns fears and worries.

I don't know how long the honeymoon lasted. It was an idyllic time for the church. But, as all honeymoons do, at least on this side of life, it came to an end.

Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of property but decided to only bring a part of it to the church. We know this was a big problem because they received the death penalty for their crime. A little heavy handed if you ask me. I'm getting the impression that "mercy" was not on Peter's Spiritual Gifts inventory.

Ananias and Sapphira were not condemned because they brought only a part; they were *condemned because they pretended to bring the whole*. They are not condemned for not bringing enough. You need to understand this is not a story about lack of generosity. It's not that they put \$2 in the offering plate and the church wanted \$50. No, it's that they wanted both worlds. They wanted to keep what they had — their life as it was with the security that comes with property — and they wanted desperately to be fully part of this church that was so full of life.

In C.S. Lewis' wonderful little book *The Great Divorce*, (which is not about the divorce between a once married couple, but rather the divorce between heaven and hell), he wrote: "In the end there are two kinds of people: those who say to God 'Thy will be done' and those to whom God says 'Thy will be done'. You see, in the end it is not possible to have it our way and God's way. We have to choose.

So what's with the death sentence?

First of all, it's possible this story never actually happened or that it was exaggerated in the telling. It might be sort of an urban legend of the early church meant to warn people. (A bit like the Titanic camp song that ends: "And the moral of this story is very plain to see, always wear a life-preserver when you go out to sea, for husbands and wives, little children lost their lives, it was sad when the great ship went down.")

But whether it happened as written or not; there is truth in the story. In a way they had already chosen death and not life.

This is far from a perfect comparison – but that day last year with little Rowan on the side of the lake didn't end in a victory moment. It ended with all the other kids getting out when they had had enough fun and this poor little kid in tears blaming everyone else but himself and his fear of getting in the water.

Fear and misery won that night. It didn't feel good for Rowan and it didn't feel good for any of us watching and witnessing.

This scripture reading is a strange story (that didn't make it into the lectionary) but there is truth in it – clinging to our small securities (more like insecurities) and self leads to death, fear and misery, and not to life. It's a story of cheap grace versus costly discipleship.

What is your solid ground? One of mine – (I've got many) is perfectionism and control. (I guess that's two, but I think they are so closely related they are almost one).

When you feel that anxiety or anger rising in a situation, ask yourself "What is it that I think I need, that I don't actually need right now?" Usually it's a sign that we are relying on something other than God to give us stability, security or peace. Being able to name that thing that I think I need, that I don't actually need, is so important. When you are really upset, you won't always be able to name what you think you need, that you don't need. But in hindsight you can look back and ask with the hope that more and more you will recognize what you are clinging to, what your security blanket is, and with prayer take a step towards trusting God. Take a step towards true life, true joy; true peace.

Can you dip your toe into a life of faith? Absolutely you can. But don't expect that you're going to feel the warmth, the joy, the feeling of being able to lie almost weightless in the water if you're only ankle deep.

Is there anything better than floating? What does it take to float? It takes deep enough water. It helps if you've got some internal personal floatation devices – we all have a little more of that after the pandemic. But you also need to relax – tense muscles don't float.

If you want the full experience of a life with Christ – if you want the full life—then you have to leave solid ground behind and trust the water.

The great thing about being 6 is that you get a second chance. After a good night's sleep and with a warmer day and the adults in the water too – Rowan took the leap, went all in and loved it.

When I put my Jesus glasses on, as I always do when I read the Bible, I imagine Jesus confronting Ananias and Sapphira with the truth – just like he did with the woman at the well. And then I imagine him offering them living water – not the water they were drinking from, like worrying about what others think, or fear, or pride of being self-made. All of these waters make you thirsty again – and if you drink enough of it, it's like sea water — it makes you thirsty for more and more and then it kills you.

Like little Rowan, I don't think this was Ananias and Sapphira's best day. So I imagine that after being offered living water and after a bedtime snack and a good sleep they might wake up and see clearly the life that is set before them – a freedom from fears and an abundance of life beyond what any bank account or piece of property could give them — a life beyond anything they could possibly dream of.

I imagine them taking a running jump and cannonballing into the lake that is a life in Christ, shouting out "Thy will be done!"  
What about you?