1. Community and authenticity

We finishing a sermon series this week called: “Community – connect and grow”. If you missed any of the sermons they are on the website. And I would certainly encourage you to listen to them because they define the theme for our church this year. We are striving to strengthen the sense of connectedness without our congregation and trust that it will produce gospel growth.

So far we have said that the gospel itself is central to community because it provides the foundation for the humility and grace that are the fabric of true community. When the gospel is and continues to do its work it destroys pride (I am what I am by Christ ALONE) and it destroys judgement (I am what I am by Christ ALONE).

The kind of community that we are drawn into is a one-anothering community where the church builds itself up as each part does its work. And the most accessible and natural application of that is small groups of Christians that meet together (just like the early church) in homes for prayer, communion, Bible and sharing of needs.

I was listening to Andy Stanley share about small groups. He said the three commitments you have to make are: (a) show up, (b) join in, (c) be real. I find that quiet helpful as a trajectory for any person in a group. At first you might just show up. Then the next step is joining in – once you’ve been there a couple of time you need to participate in discussion and reach out to build relationships. Once you have confidence in the group you can be more and more real with your fellow members. If all you do it show up you’ll give in after a while because there is no relationship; if all you do is join in your growth will stagnate after a while because the gospel won’t be reaching deeper and deeper into your heart. You need to continually move towards ‘be real’.

To understand how important that is to the heart of God I want us to turn to a story that starts in Acts 4 and runs into Acts 5.

- Voluntary socialism

Towards the end of chapter 4 of Acts we hear about the incredible generosity and sacrificing that was happening among the fledgling group of believers.

Read Acts 4:32-35. There was no law imposed by the apostles, but God was at work in their hearts a Spirit-led voluntary socialism. The story then focuses in on one man in particular

Read Acts 4:36-37. Here is this dream community where people are valued over possessions – full of grace and love and self-giving. One man who embodied this selfless giving was a guy called Joseph got the nick name Barnabus.
• **Buying a reputation**

The passage goes on to identify a couple, Ananias and Sapphira who also sell property and give to the church, but in a deceitful way.

Read Acts 5:1-11. So when Ananias comes to give the money Peter challenges him. Note they had the freedom to do with the money what they wanted; they were not compelled to give – they could have kept everything (voluntary socialism), or put any proportion of the selling price at the church’s disposal. They were trying to buy a reputation with dishonesty – they wanted to have the reputation of being a Barnabus (and maybe the unsolicited respect of the community, and a cool nickname from the disciples) BUT without the character of a Barnabus!

God is serious about sin, about lying, theft, and dishonesty in his covenant community. You see it at the beginning of the establishment of the people of Israel in the Promised Land (story of Achan) and at the beginning of the establishment of the new covenant community – the church. This is very scary stuff – and it is meant to be!

The root is clearly pointed out: lies come from the father of lies, Satan. There is no surprise that Satan is trying to undermine the birth of the church. The lie is considered to be lying to and testing the Holy Spirit (v. 3, 9) and primarily against God and then only against the community (v. 4b). They believe that a lie could earn them a reputation. They believed that they could counterfeit the work of the Holy Spirit (character, generosity, i.e. Christian growth)!

If you really want to get the right perspective on this story you need to imagine yourself as one of the men who carried the body – if you were there you would remember it for a long time. I want to know what happened in the three hours between his death and her death, and how did he know that she was also going to die.

The point is in verse 5 and 11 – ‘Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.’

• **Freedom in a relationship with God**

Christianity offers you to opportunity to be who you are – to stop pretending and running and hiding. Christ offers you acceptance where you are now and then a path of growth.

And I hear you say, “well that’s no different – he doesn’t love me for who I am”. But here is the thing: he does, and he loves you enough to not leave you where you are, to offer you healing and wholeness. God doesn’t love some future version of you.

Maybe the only gospel, church, Christianity you know is: “you are a sinner, repent and believe in Christ”. I am saying that there is an offer of freedom and wholeness and healing...
We are more flawed and sinful than we ever dared admit, but at the same time more loved and accepted than we ever dared hope! If you have ever lain on your bed at night and thought, “if only I could find the place where I am loved and accepted for who I am”. Perhaps you were lying next to your spouse and you know that the truth is even he/she doesn’t know the real you – and you fear that fact. I am saying to you this morning that there is a road to finding acceptance and wholeness starts with God – where his unconditional love and transform your heart.

- Authentic relationship with others

Ananias and Sapphira believed that a lie could buy them a reputation. They believed that they could counterfeit the work of the Holy Spirit (character, generosity, i.e. Christian growth)! Their actions spring from pride (the sin of Satan and of A and E) – they seek personal glory under the guise of godliness.

I think this is the most apply-able point of the passage for the church today. We still tend to want to counterfeit the work of the HS in our lives with the “I’m fine mentality”. We pretend that everything in our Christian lives is okay, we play Christian on Sunday for an hour or two but at home it is a different story. Or, even worse than that, in our hearts we know that we are not being truthful with ourselves.

God wants to draw attention to the one sin that could make the church ineffective and potentially destroy the unity (one heart and one mind) of the fledgling Christian community: faking the work of the HS; pretending that we are what we are not to others. This puts a far deeper meaning on authentic relationships than just the need to grow, or the practical help to be gained through discipleship – it is offensive to God.

- Relational authenticity in Community Groups

Overcoming the barriers

- There is a risk to making yourself known to others. I started by saying: show up, join in, and be real. No one goes from first meeting to 50 meters below in the first meeting. But I do think the Bible compels us to move intentionally towards real, deep, honest relationships.

- The things that present us like pride, fear or rejection or judgement are real. But we have to stare them in the face and make a commitment to love: “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless –
it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.”¹

LET YOU LOVE ME - Rita Ora

[Verse 1]
I should've stayed with you last night
Instead of going out to find trouble
That's just trouble (Mmm)
I think I run away sometimes
Whenever I get too vulnerable
That's not your fault (Yeah)

[Pre-Chorus]
See, I wanna stay the whole night
I wanna lay with you 'til the sun's up
I wanna let you inside
Oh, Heaven knows I've tried

[Chorus]
I wish that I could let you love
Wish that I could let you love me
I wish that I could let you love
Wish that I could let you love me
Say what's the matter, what's the matter with me?
What's the matter with me?
Oh, I wish that I could let you love
Wish that I could let you love me now
Oh, I wish, oh, I wish, oh, I wish, oh, I wish, I
Oh, I wish, oh, I wish, oh, I wish, oh, I wish, I

[Verse 2]
And every time it gets too real
And every time I feel us sabotaging

¹ C.S. Lewis, The Four Loves
I start running (Yeah, eh)
And every time I push away
I really wanna say that I’m sorry (Yeah)
But I say nothing (Yeah)

Questions

1. Read Acts 4:32-5:11
2. What strikes you about this story? What questions do you have? What is clear to understand? What is difficult to understand?
3. What is the sin that is identified in Ananias and Sapphira’s life?
4. Why do you think this sin is considered as testing the Holy Spirit?
5. What is significant about verse 5:4b (to whom Ananias lied)?
6. Do you notice any ways in which the attitudes and motivations of Ananias and Sapphira permeate our Christian conduct?
7. How does this passage affect your view of God?
8. How should this passage change the way we relate to each other?
9. What would it mean to put it into practice in your group on a weekly basis?